Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity

Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman

edited by Alain Epp Weaver

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Series Preface

Cornelius H. Wedel, the first president of Bethel College from the beginning of classes in 1893 until his death in 1910, was an early scholar of Anabaptist-Mennonite studies. His four volume survey of Mennonite history, published from 1900 to 1904, helped to rescue Anabaptism and Mennonitism from their marginal and denigrated portrayal in standard works of church history. Wedel saw Anabaptism and Mennonitism as part of a tradition of biblical faithfulness going back to the early church. He saw his people not in isolation but as a part of God's wider plan in world history.

The founders of Bethel College had a vision to promote the liberal arts through the cultivation of the intellect in all fields of knowledge and to serve the church through the preservation of Mennonite values and preparation for service. The 1994 college mission statement continues the commitment to "intellectual, cultural, and spiritual leadership for the church." The Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series, initiated by the Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College as part of the college centennial celebration in 1987, hopes to further these goals by publishing research in Anabaptist and Mennonite history with a special emphasis on works with a connection to Bethel College, such as campus lecture series and projects based on the holdings of the Mennonite Library and Archives.

John D. Thiesen
Series Editor

Foreword

I first encountered Gordon Kaufman's writings in a course on contemporary theology at Bethel College. The text was "Two Models of Transcendence" from *God the Problem*. I don't have a clear memory of my initial response to the essay, only the feeling, shared by others in the class, that we were tasting "forbidden fruit."

Where I received the impression that Kaufman was a marginal, potentially heretical theologian is hard to pinpoint. The professor of that college course, Duane Friesen, certainly wasn't to blame. But my ignorant assumption about Kaufman and his writings did conform to a stereotyped portrayal of Kaufman which is unfortunately widespread among Mennonite communities in North America: namely, that Kaufman strayed far from his Mennonite heritage, was contaminated by liberal Protestantism at Yale and then Harvard, and today is barely recognizable as a *Christian*, let alone *Mennonite*, theologian.

As I became more familiar with Kaufman's theology, this stereotype quickly crumbled. What I found in Kaufman's writings, as I later discovered others had found before me, was a serious and honest attempt to make Christianity intelligible to the "modern" mind. For many Mennonites and other Christians, Kaufman has helped facilitate faith's search for understanding.

Kaufman turned out not to be the heretic I had been led to believe. He certainly wasn't a "marginal" figure as far as Mennonite theology was concerned. It became clear to me that Kaufman has been central to the Mennonite theological conversations around the possibility and nature of a *Mennonite* theology. My growing interest in Kaufman's work led me to write some small articles discussing his theology. When, in 1991, I attended the American Academy of Religion meetings, I was naturally interested in a *Festschrift* which had just been published in Kaufman's honor. *Theology at the End of Modernity*, edited by Sheila Greeve Davaney, was a strong collection of essays both complimentary and critical of Kaufman. I was disturbed, however, that not a single Mennonite theologian had contributed an essay. This omission was the impetus for my decision to organize a **Mennonite** *Festschrift* for Kaufman.

This volume celebrates the contribution Kaufman and his writings have made to Mennonite theology. It also serves, I hope, as a preliminary step towards an evaluation of Kaufman's work. And finally, I believe that the essays in this *Festschrift* will give the reader an introduction to the breadth and the depth of the Mennonite theological conversation, a conversation which Kaufman has done much to shape.

Many people have helped bring this project to completion. I would like to thank Duane Friesen, Jim Juhnke, and John D. Thiesen for their efforts to ensure that this *Festschrift* would find a home. J. Denny Weaver, Loren Johns, Perry Bush and Jim Satterwhite provided invaluable expertise with word-processing. Joanne Juhnke compiled the index and Merrill Krabill helped with graphics. I am also grateful to Gordon Kaufman and Donald Stoesz for their assistance in preparing the bibliography of Kaufman's writings which appears at the end of this volume. Finally, I wish to express my deep appreciation to Sonia Weaver, for her support, encouragement, and suggestions as this project took shape.

AEW
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Introduction: Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity

Alain Epp Weaver

The very phrase, "Mennonite theology," is problematic. Some Mennonites regard systematic reflection on doctrine warily, fearing that it will detract from ethics. Others question if it is legitimate to talk of a distinctively *Mennonite* theology; Mennonites, they argue, offer accents to traditional orthodox doctrine, not alternatives to that doctrine. Finally, if one speaks of "Mennonite theology" instead of *"a* Mennonite theology," one risks erroneously suggesting that there is a monolithic quality to Mennonite theologizing.

A cursory look at the paradigms which have dominated Mennonite thought and polity for the last 50 years would seem to support the contention that Mennonites do not possess a unique *theological* heritage, that is, a unique way of thinking about God. The Anabaptist Vision paradigm, inaugurated by Harold S. Bender, defined the Anabaptist-Mennonite genius solely in ethical and ecclesiological terms.[1] The Concern movement, and what might be called the Politics of Jesus paradigm that grew out of it, extended this emphasis, particularly on the ecclesiological front.[2] Bender, John C. Wenger, and other proponents of the Anabaptist Vision assumed the tenets of Protestant orthodoxy.[3] And John H. Yoder, the foremost ideologue of what might be called the Politics of Jesus paradigm, rarely addresses *theological* concerns, narrowly defined, preferring to focus instead on discipleship, ethics, and ecclesiology.[4]

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[1]See Bender's "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* 13 (March 1944): 3-24; reprinted in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (April 1944): 67-88. Bender defines Anabaptism as: an understanding of Christianity as discipleship; the church as brotherhood (sic); and an ethic of nonresistant love. (*MQR*, 78).

[2]The Concern movement's ideology, while not uniform, is represented in the pamphlet series published by Herald Press from 1954 to 1971, entitled *Concern: A Pamphlet Series for Christian Renewal.* For an evaluation of the Concern movement, see the materials in the special issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* 8 (Spring 1990).

[3]The one major doctrinal work to come out of the Goshen circle, Wenger's *Introduction to Theology* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1954), reflects this dependence on Protestant orthodoxy.

[4]It is perhaps significant that the one book in which Yoder deals primarily with theology, rather than social ethics, is entitled *Preface to Theology* (emphasis mine). [*Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (1981; available at cost of photocopying from Cokesbury Bookstore, Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, NC 27706)]. Some wonder if Yoder has departed in his christological ruminations from the orthodox understanding of Christ as substitutionary

It would be a mistake to think of these paradigms as having been surpassed. The Anabaptist Vision and the Politics of Jesus continue to have a deep resonance with Mennonite laity, pastors and theologians. The Anabaptist Vision model, however, has been eroded by historical research which disproved the assumption of Bender and company that Swiss Anabaptism enjoyed primacy and normativity in the Anabaptist movement as a whole. Bender's tripartite definition of Anabaptism was shown not to apply to all of the diverse Anabaptist groupings. Plurality was at the heart of Anabaptism from its earliest beginnings.[5]

Talk of paradigms should not lead one to ignore the pluralistic character of Mennonite thought during the last half-century. While Goshen dominated the North American scene, first through the Anabaptist Vision and then through the Politics of Jesus, other forces were at play in the Mennonite world. C. Henry Smith, for example, differed quite markedly from Bender on the essence of Anabaptism.[6] And in contrast to the separatist ethic of nonresistance espoused by Guy F. Hershberger and parts of the Concern group, other Mennonites championed a "culturally engaged pacifism."[7]

Gordon D. Kaufman emerged from this very tradition of "culturally engaged pacifism." Kaufman was the first Mennonite

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sacrifice; Yoder explicitly denies that this is so, stating that he simply wishes to balance the traditional atonement imagery with others which center more on Jesus' birth, life, work, death and resurrection. See Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972; rev. ed. 1994), 226-27.

[5]This shift in the understanding of Anabaptism's origins was originally stated in James Stayer, Werner Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49 (April 1975): 83-121. With the demise of the historiography on which the Anabaptist Vision was based, the question of what the new historiography means for Mennonite theology today raises itself. Two efforts to give a theological reading of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist story are Arnold Snyder, "Beyond Polygenesis: Recovering the Unity and Diversity of Anabaptist Theology," in H. Wayne Pipkin, ed. *Essays in Anabaptist Theology* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 1-34, and J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist: The Origins and Significance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1986).

[6]See Keith Sprunger, "C. Henry Smith's Vision of Mennonite History," *Mennonite Life* 50 (March 1994): 4-11.

[7]The phrase comes originally from Lauren Friesen's article, "Culturally Engaged Pacifism," in John Richard Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types* (Akron: Mennonite Central Committee Peace Office, 1991), 15-25. See also James C. Juhnke's article in this volume for a fuller exposition of this tradition.

to set about theologizing systematically[8], and, as his essay in this volume makes clear, his theological concerns grew out of his Mennonite upbringing. As a teacher, Kaufman has helped to mold several Mennonite theologians.[9] As a writer, he has exerted a significant influence on contemporary Mennonite theologizing. Some Mennonite theologians, like Tom Finger in this volume, have followed Kaufman's lead in elaborating systematic theologies.[10] For others, his writings serve as a foil against which they do theology "correctly." And for still other theologians and theologically-minded Mennonites, Kaufman's probings of the divine mystery are an inspirational sign of hope that the Christian categories can be made intelligible to the (post)modern mind, that they can enjoy new life amidst the vicissitudes of a pluralistic, relativist world.

In describing the contemporary Mennonite theological scene, which Kaufman has done so much to shape, one would do better no longer to speak of dominant paradigms, but rather of plurality and diverse voices and "schools." The Anabaptist Vision and the Politics of Jesus no longer command the widespread allegiance they once did; instead, a variety of Mennonite theologies vie for the title of *the* Mennonite theology, or, in the case of some, deny that there should be one, single Mennonite theology. The essays in this volume mirror this theological diversity:

Some of the contributors continue to operate out of the Politics of Jesus paradigm. Harry Huebner, working on the level of theological methodology, develops the implicit assumption in John Yoder's work that tradition is a valid mode of moral (and theological) inquiry. Ted Koontz has picked up the sectarian dimension of Yoder's project in working out his position on the relationship of the Christian and the church to the world. In contrast, Duane Friesen, in his theology of culture, elaborates Yoder's conception of Christ as the transformer of culture, *contra* H.R. Niebuhr's characterization of Mennonites embodying a

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[8]See Kaufman's *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968).

[9]An undoubtedly incomplete list would include Duane Friesen, Gayle Gerber Koontz, Carl Keener, Ted Koontz, and historian James Juhnke; one should also mention Church of the Brethren theologian Melanie May.

[10]Two examples of Mennonite systematic theology that appeared after Kaufman's 1968 effort are Thomas Finger's *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, Volume I (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985); Volume II (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1989); and C. Norman Kraus' two volumes, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1987), and *God Our Savior: Theology in a Christological Mode* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1991).

Christ against culture stance. And J. Denny Weaver, inspired by Yoder, has elucidated a specifically Mennonite understanding of christology, and has related this conception to ethics, ecclesiology, and, in this volume, interfaith relations. The Yoderian heritage has thus passed on to a new generation of theologians and has been taken up in a variety of directions.

While the Politics of Jesus paradigm, as propounded by both Yoder and his disciples, tends to focus on Mennonite uniqueness, in its ethical tradition and theological emphases, others argue that in terms of theological doctrines, Mennonite are one with other orthodox Christians. A. James Reimer clearly articulates a position held by many in the Mennonite churches, namely, that Mennonites are (or at least should be) first and foremost orthodox, trinitarian Christians who accept the theology of the classical creeds; ethical distinctives, such as nonresistance and pacifism, are secondary.

Finally, still others have joined Kaufman in his historicist, constructivist project. In this volume, Scott Holland, Ted Grimsrud, Daniel Liechty, and Carl Keener all articulate positions in which theology is viewed as a constructive, human activity, one that is primarily about how life is to be lived. The traditional theological authorities, such as Scripture and tradition, while part of the conversation, do not dictate their theologies.

This exceedingly brief overview of Mennonite theology today is not comprehensive.[11] Also, a typology such as the above should not obscure the fact that all Mennonite theologians are grappling with many of the same issues. If, as Gordon Kaufman claims, theologians do their work "in face of mystery," it is also true to say that all theologians today, Mennonite ones included, operate in face of modernity, or, more ambiguously, postmodernity. Some of the issues (post)modernity raises for theology, and dealt with in this collection of essays, include:

—The implications of the historicity of knowledge, truth and reason for theology. Historicism undermines the authority of tradition, Scripture, natural law, and reason. Theology comes to

[11]A growth area in Mennonite theology, unfortunately not represented in this volume, is that of feminist theology. Two prominent voices in Anabaptist feminist theology and former students of Gordon Kaufman, Gayle Gerber Koontz and Melanie May, originally agreed to contribute essays to this *Festschrift*; regrettably, due to other academic commitments, they later withdrew. The reader interested in Mennonite feminist theology should turn to two special journal issues: the April 1994 issue of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* and the Spring 1992 issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* contain papers delivered at two conferences dedicated to the theologies of Mennonite women.

be understood as a constructive, human activity. Gordon Kaufman, more than any other theologian, has given consideration to how God, Christ, and humanity are to be conceived under such conditions.

—The relation of theology to other voices in culture. Theologians increasingly seek to relate religious belief to art, literature, science, and other cultural fields.

—The significance of relativism and pluralism. If all truth is historically conditioned, tradition-dependent, then how are Christians to assert the universality of Christian truth-claims (if at all), when other religions have their own criteria by which they measure truth?

—The role of the theologian. Is the theologian a recorder of her community's beliefs, or is s/he rather a creative prophet who constructs humane worldviews in which to live? What privilege, if any, does the trained theologian enjoy in religious discussion compared to others? What is the relationship of power and the theologian's language?

These are some of the (post)modern questions Mennonite (and other Christian) theologians today confront and seek to address. As they search for answers, they are fortunate to have the example of Gordon Kaufman, one who has never shied away from the Christian's duty to make Christian faith and belief intelligible and persuasive, ready at hand. As new voices enter in the Mennonite theological conversation, as new paradigms are molded, Gordon Kaufman and his writings will continue to inspire and provoke. The contributors to this volume, and the Mennonite churches at large, owe him a deep debt of gratitude.

Chapter 1

The Mennonite Roots of My Theological Perspective

Gordon D. Kaufman

I have been asked by the editor of this volume to write an essay "relating your theology to Anabaptist-Mennonite concerns." In response to this request, I have selected a number of the more salient themes worked out in my recently published book, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Harvard University Press, 1993)—some of which may seem to many to have moved rather far from the Mennonite traditions in which I was reared—and have tried to point out some respects in which, from my point of view, these are connected with traditional "Anabaptist-Mennonite concerns."[1]

I

A principal characteristic of the theological program worked out in *In Face of Mystery* is its emphasis on the central role of faith in human life—all human life, not merely Christian existence. We human beings live in an extremely complex and deeply mysterious world which is in many respects beyond our comprehension. As creatures who have emerged into consciousness and self-consciousness here on planet Earth, we cannot help but wonder about our place in the ultimate scheme of things; and in our various religions, philosophical traditions, and (more recently) scientific thinking we have attempted to articulate some answers to this question. But these answers are many and various, often contradictory to each other, and it appears there is no way for humans to come to any certainty about which (if any) among these might be true, which seriously misleading or false. It is, however, only in terms of some understanding of ourselves as human, and some sort of conception or picture of our place in the world roundabout us, that we—self-conscious beings that we are—make the many decisions and perform the actions which life continually demands of us. So we are forced, willy-nilly, to take up a posture in the

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[1]For an account that emphasizes more the historical development of my theological reflection out of its "Mennonite roots," see my article, "Apologia Pro Vita Sua," in Harry Loewen, ed., *Why I Am a Mennonite* (Herald Press, 1988), 126-138.

world, to live in terms of some particular understanding of the context in which we find ourselves (some world-picture) and in terms of some particular notions of the sorts of beings we humans are, the kinds of problems we confront and the possibilities open to us in addressing those problems.

No one, of course, puzzles out these unanswerable riddles simply by himself or herself. When we muse and think about them, we always work out of and build upon the traditions which have emerged and developed in the culture in which we have grown up (or presently live), and which have been handed over to us by our parents and communities. In short, we accept *on faith* most of what we have been taught about life and the world, modifying it in whatever ways our own experience and reflection requires; and we live out of, and on the basis of, the self-understanding and the orientation in the world provided by that faith. The various religious traditions around the globe represent the major modalities of faith which have ordered and oriented the lives of women and men in the innumerable cultural streams that have emerged and developed in history. These should be understood, thus, as presenting a manifold of faith-alternatives, each of which has enabled generations of humankind (sometimes a great many generations) to find their way in the world, making it possible for human life to go on. The Christian tradition, in its many and diverse versions, is one family of such orienting faith-traditions; in its Mennonite form, it is a faith-tradition out of which the contributors to this book attempt to live, in terms of which we have tried to find our way in the world.

I shall make no effort here to argue for the correctness of this general understanding of human existence as always lived on the basis of some sort of faith; nor shall I argue for the claim sometimes made that Christian faith—perhaps even a Mennonite version of Christian faith—is superior to all others, the only faith divinely "revealed," ultimately the only "true" faith for all humans. I do want to suggest, though, that the overall conception I am sketching here is in certain respects one deeply rooted in a Mennonite understanding of Christian faith—an understanding that what faith is about most fundamentally is *how life is to be lived*. Though mainstream versions of Christianity have often emphasized certain *truths*—basic beliefs or doctrines to which Christians must subscribe, and without which they cannot properly be regarded as Christian—Mennonites have tended to regard questions about the sort of life one is actually living as more important than questions about the beliefs to which one

subscribes: "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (Jas. 2:17); "You will know them by their fruits" (Mt. 7:16). For this reason Mennonites historically, for the most part, have not insisted on formal subscription to creedal statements; and, though they have formulated communal confessions of faith from time to time, it was the form and quality of life as it was lived that was central to their concern. To Mennonites the transformed life—as presented in Jesus' teachings, ministry and death, and further exemplified and articulated in the early Christian communities—has always been the mark of true faith, not verbal assent to highly refined doctrinal formulas;[2] and it is no accident, therefore, that although Mennonite communities commonly thought of themselves as holding to "orthodox" Christian beliefs, they have (until recently) produced almost no theologians trained in the metaphysical niceties of traditional Christian doctrine.

This conviction about the priority of life—and of the standards or criteria in terms of which life is to be lived—over formulations of doctrine or belief has always informed my theological stance and is particularly emphasized in my recent book. Moral and ethical concerns are taken as foundational in this work, and religious and other metaphysical truth-claims are regarded as gaining their deepest meaning through the ways in which they help to provide orientation in life, thus facilitating living rightly. From this perspective it is their pragmatic implications for ongoing human life and well-being that gives such "truths" their principal significance, not their supposed "correspondence" with "how things really are." This latter issue, in my view, is not one on which human beings—lacking, as we do, any "God's-eye view" of reality—are competent to make reliable judgments; and it is the better part of wisdom, therefore, to refrain from making any such claims. What we do need to attend to with respect to various conceptions of the world and understandings of the

[2]While a graduate student at Yale Divinity School I made a study of the early Anabaptists' views on this matter (see my article, "Some Theological Emphases of the Early Swiss Anabaptists," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* [1955] 25: 75-99). Despite many other changes in scholarly understanding and interpretation of the Anabaptists, on this particular point current research does not seem to qualify significantly the conclusions I reached at that time. A recent study of "The Community of Scholars and the Essence of Anabaptism" (*The Mennonite Quarterly Review* [1993] 67: 429-450) by Calvin Redekop reveals that most scholars are still largely in agreement that it was issues of form, style, and moral quality of life and praxis that most decisively distinguished the Anabaptists from other Christians of their time, not matters of theological doctrine.

human are the sorts of human existence that they help to promote and the forms of human life that they facilitate.

Much of my professional life, of course, has been devoted to reflection on philosophical and theological issues posed by Christian faith, and posed for Christian faith by the modernity/postmodernity in which we today live. But my work on these problems has always been heavily influenced by the "practical" sectarian stance in the world into which I was initiated in my Mennonite youth. I had early learned to be suspicious of many practices and beliefs taken for granted in American society at large, as well as of some of the major claims made by mainstream Christianity (combined as these were with what I took to be its serious evasions of the moral demands of Christian discipleship). But when I began to become more self-conscious about this counter-cultural consciousness (at Yale Divinity School where a thoughtful and highly articulate critique of Christian pacifism was provided by Liston Pope and H. Richard Niebuhr), I found it necessary to ask some hard epistemological questions of myself. Should I continue to take the position (acquired in my "cognitive minority" upbringing) that we Mennonites are simply and flatly in the right on this matter, and these others are completely wrong? That is, should I continue to hold that my small group possesses the *truth* on these points on which we find ourselves in strong disagreement with others, even though (as it now seemed clear to me) many of these others were just as faithful and thoughtful Christians as I took (loyal) Mennonites to be? That seemed a highly paradoxical and much too simplistic position to hold. One could not help but ponder, indeed, whether it was not a position that consisted, at least in significant part, of stubborn, prideful self-defensiveness and self-assertion—the very opposite of the Christian humility I had also been taught (as a Mennonite) to value highly.

An epistemological alternative—significantly informed by the theological stance I had been absorbing from H. Richard Niebuhr[3]—was by this time, however, becoming available to me; and this I eventually adopted. A proper understanding of human finitude and sinfulness teaches us that no human being is ever in

[3]Niebuhr made a strong impact on my thinking not only through his classes; his positive theological interpretation of historical relativism, particularly in *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941) decisively shaped my emerging theological standpoint. His later writing on this and related issues, e.g. in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1960) was also formative in my theological work.

possession of *the truth* (this belongs to God alone); and to make absolutistic claims that we "like God, know . . . good and evil" (Gen. 3:5; cf. 3:22) is thus always in fact to "fall" away from God. The most that we humans can properly claim is some insight into those partial and relative truths that are available to us from the standpoint in the world which we occupy; and if our fellow humans disagree with us, especially on profound moral and religious issues, we should sympathetically attempt to understand and appreciate the insights made available to them by their significantly different standpoints. With this kind of non-defensive openness one might come to a deeper perception of the matter at hand, and—even more important (especially from a Mennonite perspective)—one might find a way to live in reconciliation with those others with whom one is, in certain respects, in such profound disagreement. Working out a theoretical statement about human being and human knowledge which could sustain this kind of relativistic understanding of the human condition became the project undertaken in my doctoral dissertation (1955) and later published in my first book, *Relativism, Knowledge and Faith* (University of Chicago Press, 1960). It was a position the central impetus toward which came from my Mennonite formation as a member of a cognitive minority, a theological/philosophical position that not only gave significant value to such minority standpoints and the insights they make possible, but in fact implied the importance of affirming (not fighting against) the pluralism of human religious and cultural life as a whole. It was a position which has continued to nourish my religious and philosophical reflection and writing up to and including *In Face of Mystery*.

II

Although I did not immediately recognize this to be the case, a fairly radical reorienting of Christian theology is implied if one attempts to work from the moral/ethical/epistemological standpoint that I had thus begun to adumbrate. For now it becomes unnecessary, even mistaken, to ground theological work on certain doctrinal emphases or truth-claims, whether biblical or creedal (as most traditional theology, Mennonite as well as mainstream, has done)—an approach which has led to thinking of theological work as essentially a kind of *hermeneutic* task, the translation or interpretation of traditional ideas and perspectives into a more contemporary idiom. Instead of working within a position of that sort, it increasingly seemed to me important for

theologians to concern themselves directly with the social, cultural, and intellectual problems faced by human beings in today's world, i.e., to focus their work in terms of major moral and ethical issues (broadly conceived). The theological task became, thus, a double one: a) attempting to see in what respects Christian insights could illuminate these issues, thus facilitating understanding and analysis of them,[4] and b) ascertaining the respects in which Christian perspectives themselves needed to be modified or reconstructed to enable them to take fully into account the enormous problems with which today's world confronts humanity. With human existence and theological reflection understood in these broadly moral/ethical terms—i.e., terms emphasizing human living and acting in the world—theologians are freed to make imaginative pragmatic moves as they reconstruct earlier Christian ideas and ways of thinking in their concern to address effectively the actual social, cultural and religious problems at hand. (This position, which I was not able to articulate clearly until the early 70's, was in some respects similar to the focus on *praxis* being emphasized by liberation theologies.)

I did not realize the wider implications of this direction in which my thinking was moving until after I had published my *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (Scribners, 1968). As I reflected on the way in which the theological position worked out in that book had taken shape—my "historicist" point of view, the theological emphases I stressed, the selection of themes I explicitly discussed and those played down or even completely omitted, the ordering of ideas, the explicit articulation of all these matters in this way rather than that, etc.—I began to realize the extent to which this work had been a direct product of my own intuitive grasp of what was central in Christian faith and the Christian standpoint, and of my own ability to work out a text (through writing and rewriting, and editing and further rewriting again, over and over many times) that would express and communicate that perspective. In short, as I came to see, this theological position down to its tiniest details had been my own "imaginative construction," built upon and grounded on the previous imaginative constructions of many others preceding me—from those who composed the Bible all the way down to

[4]The social gospel tradition is in the background of my thinking here, as well as Paul Tillich's reflections on theological method. See especially his *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, "Introduction" (University of Chicago Press, 1951).

people like Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, the Niebuhr brothers, and others in our time.

My reflections on the larger significance of this way of thinking about theology first came into focus during a sabbatical in England during 1969-70. In essays written at that time on "God as Symbol"[5] and "Theology as Construction" (unpublished) are to be found the germs of my *Essay on Theological Method* (Scholars Press, 1975; 2nd ed. 1979; 3rd ed., with revisions and a new preface, 1995), in which I was able to sketch out programmatically the idea of theology as essentially an activity of imaginative construction. It had become clear to me that theology was today, and in fact always had been, a work of the human imagination—the production of a picture or conception of human life in the world under God, created as humans sought to envision and to understand (at first in mythic modalities) themselves and the world in which they lived. Once it is recognized that this is what has been going on in theological work throughout its historical development, it becomes possible—indeed, morally obligatory—for theologians to take responsibility for all aspects of their attempts to set out Christian conceptions or pictures of human existence in the world. The kind of imaginative activity engaged in in theological work, it now became clear to me, should be understood as an expression of the perennial necessity (in all times and places) for us humans—as self-conscious beings—to *orient*[6] ourselves in life, to "get our bearings" as we seek to move around in the world in which we live. Christians seek (and believe they find) basic orientation for life in and through their relationships to what they call *God* and *Christ*; and Christian theologians, therefore, are engaged largely in attempts to construct pictures of their world, and of human life in that world, in which the bearing of these central Christian reference points or symbols ("God" and "Christ") on major issues faced by women and men is made as explicit and clear as possible. Once this is understood it becomes clear that theologians must themselves take full responsibility for their acts of intuiting and interpreting what Christian faith is all about—their selection of specific themes to emphasize and their ordering and expressing of these in particular ways, their rhetorical practices (styles of presentation, modes of argument,

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[5]To be found in *God the Problem* (Harvard University Press, 1972).

[6]The term is Kant's; see "What Is Orientation in Thinking," in *Critique of Practical Theology and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, trans. L.W. Beck (University of Chicago Press, 1949).

methods of persuasion), their overall objectives in their theological work.

Today we live in a world which, though powerfully shaped by scientific modes of knowledge and technologies employing those modes, has become greatly troubled by the failures of western civilization; it is a world in which the "wretched of the earth" seem to be increasing geometrically even while irreversible ecological breakdown threatens all human survival, a world in which a new appreciation for other cultures and other religious outlooks is growing even though bitter, highly destructive ethnic conflicts seem to be spreading like wildfire, a world in which no one has clear answers to our momentous questions. In this world the sort of orientation for addressing our major problems provided by the two principal Christian symbols is far from obvious. Increasingly the adequacy of the frames of orientation by which we seek to live is—and, it seems, quite properly should be—tested and judged by comparisons and contrasts with alternative symbolic frames of reference (humanistic, Marxist, Buddhist, naturalistic, scientistic, aesthetic, etc.). In a situation of this sort it is not satisfactory, in my view, to continue to regard Christian theological work as involving nothing more than reinterpretation, yet one more time, of inherited Christian traditions. New imaginative visions of Christian ways to orient life are required, visions which address the enormous complexities, and the overwhelming problems, with which life today confronts humankind; visions which clearly take into account the full significance of the fundamentally pluralistic character of our human existence as well as our embeddedness in the ecological web of life on planet Earth. Theology as deliberate, and fully self-conscious, imaginative construction of a Christian perspective that is cognizant of these and other important contemporary issues, and is simultaneously respectful of other alternative ways of understanding the human situation today, and of other radically different ways of being human, is now demanded. One proposal—however limited in many ways—of such a theology is to be found in my recent book, *In Face of Mystery*.

III

Up to this point I have been discussing issues bearing largely on theological methodology, attempting to tease out the respects in which the method of "imaginative construction" (which I have been elaborating during the past two decades, and which

underlies the theological position articulated in *In Face of Mystery*) can be understood to have roots in certain Anabaptist-Mennonite convictions about Christian faith and life, and the sectarian consciousness evoked by Mennonite historical experience. This method involves, as I have suggested, a kind of radicalization of certain implications of the Mennonite emphasis that it is ultimately the character and quality of communal and personal life that matters most about human existence; and the deepest importance of beliefs and practices (religious and other), thus, is not to be found so much in what they purport to express or represent (their supposed "truth") as in the kind of life they help to bring forth and to encourage (their pragmatic significance for our actual interpersonal living). In the remainder of this essay I shall take up some of the central material theological problems addressed in *In Face of Mystery*. In this book I attempt to show what a theology conceived as the self-conscious imaginative construction of a picture of humanity-in-the-world-under-God (as these matters may today be understood) might look like.

If one conceives the theological task in this way, it becomes necessary to think through as carefully as possible, and to make explicit, the principal assumptions about human being, and about the cosmic order within which human life falls, that are widely taken for granted today—a set of issues that has occupied me for most of my professional life, but which only in the last decade or so have I been able to articulate satisfactorily. The symbols "God" and "Christ" will continue effectively to orient the actual lived existence of human beings only if they are seen to connect significantly with these assumptions (i.e., connect with the practical "faiths" which in fact order many aspects of our living today). The very establishing of such (in some respects new) connections, however, cannot but affect in profound ways our understanding of the meanings of these symbols, for "God" and "Christ" (as traditionally conceived and employed) were significantly shaped by the quite different anthropological and cosmological presuppositions characteristic of earlier historical periods.

Consider, for example, the impact of human religious and cultural diversity as it today confronts us. How are we to understand the fact that human existence is (apparently) intrinsically pluralistic in character, that there have been—probably will continue to be far into the future—many different ways of being human, and many different understandings of what humans are and how they ought to live? How should we respond to this pluralism in our thinking about

human life, about what life is most fundamentally and how it ought to be conducted? This problem and these questions are of importance to Mennonites not only because they are prominent in the pluralistic/relativistic consciousness so widespread in our culture today; they take on special significance for us (at least in part, as I have suggested above) when we reflect on and try to understand our own Mennonite sectarian consciousness, our awareness of ourselves as finding it necessary and right to live and to think in ways quite out of keeping with most of our neighbors. How should we understand this human diversity of which we ourselves are also a part and an expression? Do traditional Christian (and Mennonite) ideas of the human enable us to grasp everything important that is at stake here? If not, what kind of conception should we develop to enable us better to understand and respond to these matters?

In *In Face of Mystery* I have worked out a pluralistic/historicistic understanding of human being as a way of accounting for and interpreting the significance of the great diversity and widespread disagreement about values, meanings, ways of living, conceptions of what is true about life and the world, and so on, with which we are continually confronted in today's world. It is important for us to note that the "biohistorical" understanding which I propose (and which I believe sums up assumptions about human being widely taken for granted among educated people in the West today) does not present us with a merely *descriptive* account of our reality; concealed within it are *normative* claims about our existence and the biological, social, cultural and psychological conditions which make it possible. When these normative features of our biohistorical being are made explicit, we obtain a conception of human historicity which, on the one hand, can do justice both to human diversity around the globe and to the biological grounding of our existence in the ecosystem of planet Earth; and which, on the other hand, provides criteria for identifying and addressing major sociocultural, environmental, political, and other moral/ethical issues with which men and women must today come to terms. We thus are enabled to develop an ethic grounded in and sensitive to the thoroughly pluralistic character of human existence as today understood (an ethic that includes explicit acknowledgment of the inevitable parochialness and bias of our own standpoint), which at the same time provides us with

a basis for certain insights and understandings in terms of which widely applicable moral (and other) judgments can be made.[7]

The position that I have worked out here, one could say, is a contemporary pluralistic and historicistic version of a central Pauline (and Mennonite) assumption about human existence, namely, that it is profoundly *moral* in character, laying the demand upon us that we take full responsibility for our (social and individual) moral failures; as Paul puts it: we are always "without excuse" in whatever we think or do (Rom. 1:20). I am seeking, however, to articulate this notion in a way that avoids the highly judgmental stance toward alien styles of life that is so sharply expressed by Paul (in *Romans* and elsewhere), a way that opens us to sympathetic understanding of and appreciation for patterns of human belief, practice, and institutions which are very different from those to which we are accustomed (and which for that reason seem right and good to us). This sort of understanding in turn opens for us the possibility of living and acting in a truly *reconciling* manner toward others, as we attempt to carry out the "ministry of reconciliation" to which Christians have been especially called (2 Cor. 5:18)—a matter which Mennonites have usually taken to be of central importance.[8]

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[7]These matters are worked out in detail, including a sketch of a normative ethic which, I argue, is directly implied in the biohistorical conception of human being widely accepted today (see esp. chs. 10-15). The basic characteristics of human historical existence which are elaborated in this argument are initially stated (pp. 127f.) in terms of five points: "1. That which most sharply distinguishes human beings from other forms of life . . . is their historicity, their having been shaped by and their having some control over the processes of historical change and development . . . . 2. It is clear that historical existence—that is, history and historicity—would not be possible without the maintenance of delicate balances between order and freedom, continuity and creativity. . . . 3. It is important that the exercise of our historicity in responsible ordering and action, shaping not only our own communities and selves but future history and thus future humanity as well, continues to grow through the increase of well-ordered freedom in individuals and societies. . . . 4. Our historicity, especially with respect to our capacity to take responsibility for ourselves and for the direction history is going, depends on a relatively high degree of self-consciousness and on a proper orienting of that consciousness. . . . 5. Our historicity cannot function optimally . . . unless it is working harmoniously with its biological base (which, in turn, it significantly qualifies); and only if that biological base is itself functioning well."

[8]An early version of my reflection on these issues (that I am here framing in relation to problems posed by pluralism), in which their interconnection with such typically Mennonite themes as nonresistant love is brought out, is to be found in my essay on "Nonresistance and Responsibility." Though not published until November, 1958, in *Concern: A Pamphlet Series for Questions of Christian Renewal*, No. 6 (and later reprinted in my *Nonresistance and Responsibility, and Other*

Traditional Christian ethical reflection focused attention almost exclusively on the relations of human beings to God and to one another. Today, however, it has become evident to us all that women and men must also concern themselves seriously with issues arising out of our long failure to exercise proper care for the natural world roundabout us. (In their farming practices Mennonites, as is well known, have long paid careful attention to such matters; however they, no more than others, have thought through the implications of these concerns for theological anthropology.) We need not only a historicist understanding of our pluralistic humanness; we require a *bio*historical understanding of the human—a conception which neither traditional notions of the "soul" nor traditional articulations of the Christian story (in which the significance of our being part of nature is almost lost to view) satisfactorily expresses. Our conception of the human today, that is to say, must draw heavily on the modern biological sciences, on the evolutionary theory which links us with the rest of life on earth and on an ecological understanding of our continuing interdependence with this whole web of life. These modern notions are embedded, of course, in an understanding of the cosmos as itself an evolutionary process of some billions of years, apart from which life as we know it could never have appeared—an overall picture of human existence and its environment ("the world") that is quite different from anything found in traditional Christian reflection.

A principal function of religious symbol systems (as noted above) is to provide human beings with orientation for life. For Christian faith such orientation is thought to be provided above all by the two central Christian symbols, "God" and "Christ." Thus, a major issue with which Christian theology must today come to terms is the relationship of the normative claims of these symbols with the (just mentioned) claims implicit in our biohistorical human existence. If these two sets of normative claims are not (or cannot be) brought into significant connection with each other, the Christian symbols will simply not be

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Mennonite Essays [Faith and Life Press, 1979]), the key ideas of this paper were worked out (probably between 1949 and 1951) while I was a graduate student at Yale Divinity School attempting to deal with the critique of Christian pacifism I found there. Some elaboration of these ideas was also included in my Menno Simons Lectures given at Bethel College in 1959 and published as *The Context of Decision* (Abingdon Press, 1961).

effective instruments of orientation for human beings (as we today grasp and understand ourselves).

IV

Traditional understandings of God and of God's relations to humans were originally worked out largely in terms of political and familial imagery, and this imagery has continued to be decisive in conceiving these relations. Although this way of thinking of God expresses certain important insights, it does not provide metaphors capable of expressing accurately and interpreting faithfully the modern understanding of human-existence-in-the-world which we have just been considering. For this reason these traditional images and metaphors (in my opinion) may no longer be given the defining role, in our construction of an understanding of God for today, which they had in the past. If God is to continue to be the "ultimate point of reference" (as I often put it) for all our modern/postmodern life and experience, devotion and reflection, we must learn to use ecological, evolutionary and astrophysical metaphors and images not only to think clearly about the world which provides the context of our lives, but also in our imaginative construction of image/concepts of God appropriate to that world. In my book, thus, I suggest that it is as necessary for our notion of God to be significantly reconstructed, so that it can orient us properly to address some of today's most important problems, as it is for us to reconceive the human and the world—all of these moves being required to give *ongoing life* its proper priority in our theological reflection.

I hope it is clear that my concern in these matters has not been simply to take over modern scientific ways of thinking just because they are there in our culture. Rather, the question foremost in my mind has been: how can we humans become properly oriented in the world in which we today find ourselves? If we are to continue to conceive the divine as significantly active in our world and in human life—and thus central to any adequate human orientation—we will need to imagine God in a quite different way than most Christians (including Mennonites) have heretofore supposed. My suggestion on this point in the theology worked out in *In Face of Mystery* (which, unfortunately, I cannot elaborate here), is that the symbol "God" should be taken to designate not

> one more particular being either in the world or 'out there' in some transcendental heaven . . . [but rather] the creativity at work within the unfolding evolutionary ecosystem, giving reality and directional movement and interconnectedness to the great multiplicity of particular events and beings in the world but not itself a particular being (418).

Reconception of God along these lines does not imply, as might be supposed, that Christian faith must now give up its characteristic christocentrism (a matter of particular importance to Mennonites). In theological reflection intended (as is mine) to be specifically *Christian* in character, abstract characterizations of God (like the one just stated) must be made more concrete and be further elaborated by reference to Christ. In my book I do this in connection with what I call a "wider view of Christ" (see Ch. 25), a view in which the symbol "Christ" is understood to refer to and name not simply the man Jesus of Nazareth but

> major features of the whole complex of events and relationships surrounding, including, and following upon the ministry and death of Jesus. On this view it is the appearance of a new communal ethos in history, rather than a metaphysically unique individual, that is the matter of central importance (396).

Such a view allows us to develop a christology in which the Christ-event can be seen—with the help of a qualified doctrine of incarnation—to illuminate and give defining concreteness to our understanding of both God and humanity (Chalcedon). On the one hand, the Christ-event is taken to present in concrete historical images and motifs a normative picture of human being (both communal and individual). On the other hand, precisely in taking these christic motifs and images to be *normative* for human beings—thus regarding them as resources from which criteria can be developed for properly defining and assessing other features of human reality, as resources which provide us with a "yardstick" in terms of which we can measure ourselves—we give them a special position and function; in this respect they can quite properly be regarded as a distinctive expression of the divine creativity. As *normatively human*, thus, the Christ-event is taken to manifest in a unique way (is regarded as a "revelation" of) what the divine creativity is doing—or the direction it is moving—in and through our human world, in and through human history.

We can say, then, that the Christ-event simultaneously shows us what human being truly is and ought to be; and also what God is doing, what sort of creative activity is at work here on planet Earth, and specifically in the human arena. For Christian faith, thus, the Christ-event represents in a uniquely significant way both *God's presence* to humankind and the *humankind* with whom and for whom and through whom the divine creativity is at work. Though God is actively involved at every point in the human world (indeed, in all creation), the Christ-event is that point (in the human sphere) where the conjunction of the divine and the human has become visible, so to speak—initially to the earliest Christians, and later through their witness to many others; it is that point in and through which the presence of the divine creativity and what it means for humankind has become known ("revealed") in a distinctively effective way. In this conception, to say that God was incarnate in Christ does not, of course, mean simply and directly that God was present exclusively (and miraculously) in the man Jesus; rather, the divine creativity is here seen to be incarnate

> in that larger, more complex human reality, surrounding and including and following upon the man Jesus: the new Christian community, with its spirit of love and freedom, of mutual sharing and forgiveness of one another . . . this new order of interpersonal relationships. . . . Though centering on the man Jesus, the Christ-symbol . . . [is here regarded] as extending beyond this solitary figure to include the community of reconciliation that grew up in response to his work—and in principle, thus, it can be extended to all communities of genuine healing, love, and justice. Thus, any community which becomes a vehicle in history of more profoundly humane patterns of life—as paradigmatically epitomized in the Christ-images of this seminal period—is to be understood theologically as helping to constitute (in its own distinctive way) the fullness of Christ (383, 397).

This interpretation of the "Christ-event" as essentially the appearance (creation) of a new historical constellation (rather than as a supernatural divine miracle) can be seen as an extension and radicalization of certain Anabaptist emphases. In a recent article Norman Kraus has argued that Anabaptist views on the atonement should not be reduced either to Roman Catholic or to mainstream Protestant conceptions, both of which see it as primarily concerned with the necessity of reconciling

God's love with the demands of God's justice—i.e., as an event internal to the divine being—rather than as primarily an event in history. Such views, he points out, are really "a form of docetism. Atonement becomes a *deus ex machina*. God assumes minimal humanity in order to satisfy his own divine legal requirements, and he transfers the legal merits to those whom he chooses."[9] In contrast, for the Anabaptists the atonement is essentially an event *in the historical order* creative of dramatic changes in the ordering of human affairs. Christ's was "a *representative substitution* [Kraus' emphasis; i.e., he *represented* within history what we should and can be] rather than a penal substitution." The atonement "was not an act of punishment by God in order to 'pay our debt of justice,' but an act of God's solidarity with us in order to free us and give us a new self-identity as God's children." For this reason "it is only as we share in [Jesus'] death and resurrection (Rom. 6:4), 'have *koinonia* with his suffering' (Phil. 3:9-10), follow him in denying our own ego and taking up our cross in his service (Mk. 8:34) that we have solidarity with our great Representative."[10] It is our task, thus—as disciples and believers—to order our lives, activities and institutions in accord with the normative pattern that he presented.

Although (as Kraus' text makes clear) the Anabaptists continued to interpret these transformative events in terms of the traditional natural/supernatural dualism which I seek to overcome in my work, it should be evident that their emphasis on the fundamentally historical significance of the Christ-event (in contrast with the insistence of much traditional theology on locating this event essentially within the divine being and thus beyond history) constitutes an important step toward the wider christology which I mentioned above. In my position, as in theirs, "Christ" is understood to be that point *in human history* where radical self-giving love comes into sharp focus and is made central to a community's way of understanding itself and how it should order its affairs. The symbol "Christ" thus paradigmatically signifies ("represents") not only a particular normative understanding of the human—a particular way of ordering human life; it is also taken (by Christian faith) to be an expression of the divine creativity which reveals the radical way

[9]"Interpreting the Atonement in the Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* [1992] 66: 308.
[10]Ibid., 309.

that creativity (often) works in the human world,[11] thus showing the direction in which humankind should be moving. And to be "in Christ" is to live and work in solidarity with those communities seeking to participate in, and thus to reinforce, the evolutionary-historical trajectory(s) moving in this direction. In my book this whole body of claims about God and Christ is summed up and brought into a coherent conceptual whole through a trinitarian formulation, according to which God is understood as

> (a) the ultimate reality (mystery) with which we humans have to do, a reality regarded as the creativity which is at work in and through all things (first motif); that which (b) is thus present in and with all realities of our world—all that we can experience, know, or imagine—as that which enables them to be real, their very "reality" so to speak (third motif); and which is at work, therefore, within the evolutionary-historical trajectory which has produced our humanness and is moving us toward a more profound humaneness, a trajectory manifest in and paradigmatically identifiable by the Christ-event (second motif) (423).

V

In my view, thus, although the christocentric theology which I have developed in *In Face of Mystery* does not advertise itself as a "Mennonite theology for today," it in fact expresses central Anabaptist-Mennonite concerns in its fundamental orientation and standpoint: (a) in its emphasis on the religious importance of *how we live our lives*, (b) in its focusing on *the radical christic images/concepts/demands*, as normative for human existence, and (c) in its stressing the necessity to *commit ourselves* to those radical images/concepts/demands in living out our lives. Most Mennonites (and I include myself here) will probably be inclined to regard these three emphases taken together, as implying some version of Christian pacifism; many other thoughtful Christians, however, may find somewhat different interpretations of them

[11]With respect to this point, it should be noted that this conception of God as cosmic creativity (as worked out here) is fully consonant with the idea of the "nonresistance of God" (a radicalization of a central Mennonite theme) first developed in my *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*, 219-222; and again reiterated in a more recent essay on "God and Emptiness" in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (1989) 9: 182f.

more compelling. Whatever conclusions we may reach on this particular issue, these principles themselves require (in my opinion) that the ongoing pluralism of Christian views on difficult matters of this sort be respected. In any case, the overall theological position which I work out in this book—including the method of imaginative construction, the biohistorical understanding of human being, the attention paid to the physical, biological and social sciences and to evolutionary and ecological conceptions of the cosmos and of human life, and the reconception of God in a manner appropriate to this whole body of concerns—can be understood as in significant respects an attempt to provide an appropriate contemporary theological context within which these themes central to Anabaptist-Mennonite understandings of Christian faith and life can be seen as intelligible and pertinent.

In many respects (in my opinion) this theology can quite properly be regarded as one example of what a Mennonite theology for today—articulated fully and in the round—might look like. Obviously it is only one such example, drawing heavily on certain Anabaptist-Mennonite emphases and developing these in certain quite specific directions, while playing down other themes that have also been of importance to Mennonites. Among these latter the most obvious may be, perhaps, what I regard as a much too simplistic understanding of biblical authority, one that has all too often led Mennonites with the very best of intentions to fritter away their energies on relatively trivial matters, even though the entire human world is on the verge of massive self-destruction; and a much too undialectical (sectarian) understanding of the church, making it easy for Mennonites to regard their failures to take responsibility in the wider human world, with all its tragedy and horrors, as justifiable. Others, who find these (and other) themes which have not particularly attracted me to be of real significance, can be expected, of course, to work out theological programs moving in quite different directions.[12] They should certainly be respected for that; and it is my hope that we will all increasingly join together in theological

[12]One can get some sense of the range and variety of current Mennonite approaches to theology—particularly "peace theology"—from the Fall 1992, *The Conrad Grebel Review* (Vol. 10). See particularly the articles by Tom Yoder Neufeld, Harold John Loewen, and Leo Driedger, and the review by Duane K. Friesen of John Richard Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types* (Akron, Pa: Mennonite Central Committee Peace Office, 1991).

conversation about these matters that separate us as well as those we hold in common. In such ongoing Mennonite theological conversations we should strive together to work our way through to articulations of Christian faith which will prove effectively orienting not only for Mennonites but for many others who are seeking seriously to address the enormously daunting problems faced by humankind in today's world—a world which though fractured and divided in many respects is nevertheless also interconnected and thus unified as never before, a world within which, therefore, we can continue to live and work with hope.

Theological Imagination in Historical Perspective

Chapter 2

The Mennonite Tradition of Cultural Engagement

James C. Juhnke

Gordon Kaufman emerged out of one strand of North American Mennonite life and thought which has belatedly become the subject of scholarly investigation and analysis. Kaufman himself is a descendant of "Swiss-Volhynian" Mennonites who emigrated from Eastern Europe to Kansas in 1874. In the melting pot of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kansas Mennonitism, the "Swiss-Volhynian" people merged with a wider Dutch-Russian immigrant stream. Bethel College became the center where a religious rationale for the Kansas Anabaptist-Mennonite subculture was worked out. In 1991 Lauren Friesen proposed the label, "Culturally Engaged Pacifism," for this tradition. Among its exponents Friesen listed David Goerz, Cornelius H. Wedel, Henry P. Krehbiel, Edmund G. Kaufman, Gordon D. Kaufman, and Duane Friesen. To that group Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, in their recent book, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism*, added the names of Elmer Neufeld, Frank Epp, John H. Redekop, and others.[1]

This Dutch-Russian tradition of Mennonite cultural engagement has only recently begun to gain recognition or acceptance as a tradition in its own right.[2] In the decades after World War II the Goshen school of Anabaptist historiography, led by Harold S. Bender and Guy F. Hershberger, developed the "Anabaptist Vision" interpretation of normative Mennonitism which remained dominant until the 1980s. Hershberger distinguished between "Biblical nonresistance," the Mennonite position, and the "modern pacifism" of more politically engaged groups.[3] H.

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[1]Lauren Friesen, "Culturally Engaged Pacifism," in John Richard Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types* (Akron: Mennonite Central Committee Peace Office, 1991), 15-25. Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1994), 96-99.

[2]See James C. Juhnke, "Mennonite History and Self-Understanding: North American Mennonitism as a Bipolar Mosaic," in Calvin Redekop and Samuel Steiner, eds., *Mennonite Identity* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988).

[3]Guy F. Hershberger, *War, Peace and Nonresistance* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1944), 202-231. John Howard Yoder recently has written that although Hershberger "presupposed the difference" between nonresistance and pacifism,

Richard Niebuhr's classification of Anabaptism as a "Christ against Culture" position, as well as Reinhold Niebuhr's condescending image of perfectionist and irrelevant pacifism, contributed to a popularly dominant understanding that some form of sectarian separatism was the Mennonite norm.[4] Alternative Mennonite viewpoints, less accepting of an ethical dualism between the church and the public order, were marginalized. Thus, when Gordon Kaufman wrote his 1955 essay, "Nonresistance and Responsibility," dissenting from the Goshen school's understandings of church/state issues, he seemed to be speaking from somewhere outside of normative Mennonitism rather than from within a longstanding Mennonite tradition which had its own integrity and continuity.[5] In the 1980s and 1990s a more genuinely pluralistic and historically accurate picture of Mennonite life and thought has been taking shape.[6]

Three of the most influential figures in the Mennonite "cultural engagement" tradition appear in a three-generation sequence: from Cornelius H. Wedel (1860-1910) to Edmund G. Kaufman (1891-1980) to Gordon Kaufman (1925-). C.H. Wedel was Ed. G. Kaufman's teacher. Ed. G. Kaufman was Gordon Kaufman's father. The first two both served as president of Bethel College, 1893-1910 and 1932-1952 respectively, and did their thinking and teaching for a Mennonite audience. Gordon Kaufman has maintained Mennonite identity and institutional connections, but has written theology primarily for people outside the Mennonite ethnic/religious subculture. This essay will summarize some the ideas of C.H. Wedel and Ed. G. Kaufman, and suggest that more work needs to be done on these two men as well as on others in the Mennonite "cultural engagement" tradition.

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he "also thereby refined and relativized it." See Yoder's comment in Louise Hawkley and James C. Juhnke, eds., *Nonviolent America: History Through the Eyes of Peace* (North Newton: Bethel College, 1993), 29n.

[4]H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951). Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist," in *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Scribner's, 1940), 1-32.

[5]Kaufman's essay, "Nonresistance and Responsibility," was distributed in unpublished form for several years before appearing in *Concern, A Pamphlet Series for Christian Renewal* 6 (November 1958), 5-29.

[6]See the volumes in the Mennonite Experience in America Series: Richard K. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683-1790* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1985); Theron Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1988); and James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1989).

I. C.H. Wedel: Mennonite Dialectical Idealism

Cornelius H. Wedel was a fourteen-year old lad in 1874 when his entire church community of Alexanderwohl of the Molotschna Colony in the Ukraine emigrated to south-central Kansas.[7] The Mennonites of South Russia had created a substantially self-sufficient alternative religious subculture in the Ukraine, enjoying significant control over their own local, social and political institutions. When Russian imperial reforms in the 1860s and 1870s threatened Mennonite control over their educational, political and religious life, a third of them emigrated to North America in quest of greater community autonomy. In Kansas they worked to establish religious, educational, and economic institutions appropriate to an established German-speaking ethnic subculture. They founded Halstead seminary and later Bethel College to educate leaders, fluent in both German and English, who would guide Mennonite community development in the American environment. A German-language inter-Mennonite Teachers Association, consisting of the educated intelligentsia of Kansas Mennonitism, developed curricula, discussed pedagogical issues, and explored the meaning of great literary works and theological questions. These educators, like their counterparts and cousins in the Russian empire at the same time, naturally assumed that their Mennonite communities were an expression of biblical faith and that they should be meaningfully connected to a wider *Deutschtum* and to their host national cultures.[8]

Wedel initially was a teacher in Mennonite congregation schools, and an early member of the Kansas Mennonite intelligentsia, but he believed God was calling him to service as a missionary. In 1880 he began missionary work with the General Conference Mennonite mission in Indian Territory (later Oklahoma). He was deeply disappointed when a health problem—trouble with his eyes—forced him to leave the mission field. He grieved the loss of his missionary calling even after he became president of Bethel College. In 1883 he began the first of seven years as a student and then teacher at Bloomfield College in New Jersey, a Presbyterian seminary with a special mission to train immigrant Germans for Christian leadership in American

[7]James C. Juhnke, *Dialogue with a Heritage: Cornelius H. Wedel and the Beginnings of Bethel College* (North Newton: Bethel College, 1987).

[8]Juhnke, *Vision*, 80-105.

democracy. At Bloomfield Wedel experienced an intellectual awakening. "Here I really came alive," he wrote.[9]

Wedel's spiritual and intellectual mentor at Bloomfield was Dr. George C. Seibert (1828-1902), an immigrant German Pietist historian, theologian, editor and teacher. Seibert inspired Wedel with a dialectical idealist view of God's work in the world and the church. Behind the phenomena of history lay a metaphysical reality, Seibert assumed, and the task of the Christian historian was to explore the unfolding of that reality. History took place in a dialectical pattern of opposing forces. Seibert wrote his books about classical ideal types: Greece and Christendom, Germanhood and Christendom, Germanism and Americanism. In each case, the ideal types had overlapping common elements as well as contradictory elements. The resolution of the dialectic was found in Christ. Christ was the middle point and the key of world history. The development of mankind, Seibert wrote, must be understood "from the standpoint of *Christentum*."[10]

Wedel used Seibert's historical method to devise his own unique and creative Mennonite historical synthesis, published in a sequence of six volumes which began with creation and ended in the present.[11] The central organizing principle of Wedel's church history was the dialectical relationship of the free church and the state church, which he called the *Gemeindechristentum* and the *Staatschristentum*, respectively. The "congregation christendom" consisted of small communities of believers and followers of Christ whose faithfulness to Jesus put them in conflict with ecclesiastical and worldly hierarchies. The authentic church was local, congregational, and voluntaristic; it might be forced underground by persecution, but it would emerge later

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[9]C.H. Wedel to H.R. Voth, undated letter from the H.R. Voth collection, probably spring of 1890, box 10, folder 69, Mennonite Library and Archives. Translated by Hilda Voth.

[10]George C. Seibert's works include *Griechtum und Christentum* (Barmen: W. Langewiesche, 1857); *Unsere Deutsche Vorfahren* (New York: E. Glasser, 1886); *Michel und Jonathan* (New York: E. Glasser, 1887).

[11]C.H. Wedel's six volumes were: *Randzeichnungen zu den Geschichten des Alten Testaments* (Newton: Bethel College, 1899); *Randzeichnungen zu den Geschichten des Neuen Testaments* (Newton: Bethel College, 1900); *Abriss der Geschichte der Mennoniten. Erster Teil: Die Geschichte ihrer Vorfahren bis zum Beginn des Täufertums im 16. Jahrhundert* (Newton: Bethel College, 1900); *Zweites Bändchen: Die Geschichte des Täufertums im 16. Jahrhundert* (Newton: Bethel College, 1902); *Drittes Bändchen: Die Geschichte der niederländischen, preussischen, und russischen Mennoniten* (Newton: Bethel College, 1901); and *Viertes Bändchen: Die Geschichte der Täufer und Mennoniten in der Schweiz, in Mähren, in Süddeutschland, am Niederrhein und in Nordamerika* (Newton: Bethel College, 1904).

with new force, because it represented God's intention for the way his people should live and worship on earth. The Mennonite communities in Russia and in North America were incorporations of a universal ideal whose principles had been first made manifest by Jesus and the early church—the center and turning point of history.

Wedel's *Gemeindechristentum* was a christendom, and as such did not simply stand over against human culture. Wedel affirmed human culture, having learned from Seibert to see that Christian civilization had overlapping values with Greece and Rome. A properly developed christendom—even though it be a counter-christendom—should share in the best fruits of western civilization. It was the mission of Bethel College to raise the cultural level of the Mennonite congregation-communities. Bethel should train young Mennonites as teachers, pastors, musicians, and Sunday school teachers, who would go back to their home churches and schools and raise the level of cultural awareness and appreciation, as well as of ethical discipleship. The task required sympathetic knowledge of the classics of civilization—great art, literature, philosophy, music and theology—as expressed in both the German and the English languages. At Bethel, students would encounter both Schiller and Shakespeare, read them in their original languages, and eventually take the insights and inspirations learned in the encounter back to Alexanderwohl, Gnadenberg, and West Zion. Before World War I, this ethnic-religious subculture seemed sufficiently separate and autonomous to deserve the status of a countercultural christendom.

Wedel's mingling of western literary culture with Mennonite religious tradition can be illustrated in a commentary he wrote in 1910 on the Mennonite catechism. In this catechetical guide he quoted extensively from classical works, from modern German literature, and from church hymns. He had forty Greek and Roman references, including six from Plato, five from Socrates, and one from the oracle at Delphi. He drew upon Descartes, Copernicus, Newton, Leonardo da Vinci, Dürer, Rembrandt, Gladstone, Goethe, and fifty-three unidentified poets. These were people and ideas which needed to be known in the Mennonite communities, if they were to be true expressions of congregation christendom. The institutional mission of Bethel College, in Wedel's view, had a rich mix of faith, community and culture.

Such a Mennonite catechism had never been written before. Nor has such a one been written since.[12]

Far from the misleading "Christ against culture" stereotype of Anabaptist-Mennonitism, Wedel's dialectical-idealist historical synthesis had found a way to embrace human culture while sustaining a strong sense of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity. Moreover, Wedel could claim to be a modern scientific historian. "History is the science of that which has taken place," he wrote at the outset of what he called his '*kleine opus*'. "Only free creatures can have a history."[13] The *Gemeindechristentum* was an expression of human freedom. The rural Mennonite communities in the Ukraine and in Kansas, flawed though they were, existed in historical reality and proved the ongoing relevance and truthfulness of the ideal.

The relationship between Wedel's works of church history and his works of theology is instructive. J. Denny Weaver, in a study of 19th century Mennonite atonement theology, has given us the first careful, scholarly reading of Wedel's unpublished *Glaubenslehre*, a set of notes from Wedel's teaching at Bethel College. Weaver says these notes constitute a "comprehensive systematic theology" and speculates that Wedel had intended to prepare them for publication when his life was cut short in 1910. He was not quite 50 years old. Although Wedel's theological formulations demonstrated considerable sophistication in church history, Weaver observes, there is some tension between Wedel's earlier historical work and his later theological writings. As Weaver reads the *Glaubenslehre*, Wedel's espousal of the satisfaction theory of Christ's substitutionary atonement led to an understanding of the church as "a divine creation encompassing individuals saved by grace." However, Wedel was at least in part preserved from a pietistic individualism by his insistence that the human response to grace must be manifested within the visible church. Although Wedel did not explicitly introduce the *Gemeindechristentum* concept in his *Glaubenslehre*, says Weaver, "The comprehensive outlook of *Gemeindechristentum* saves Wedel's soteriology from absorption into individualist American religious expression and instead plugs it into a historical structure with a claim to universal reality." Wedel did not fully resolve the tension between his historical and his theological concepts. Perhaps he

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[12]C.H. Wedel, *Meditationen zu den Fragen und Antworten unseres Katechismus* (Newton: self-published, 1910).

[13]Wedel, *Randzeichnungen . . . Alten Testaments.*

was moving in a more Pietistic and individualistic direction when he died. On the other hand, Wedel never did describe the church as consisting of "individuals saved by grace." To ascribe the concept of "individual" in any way to Wedel's understanding of the church may not be entirely accurate.[14]

Wedel's theological world was that of European Pietism, but he responded favorably to his limited encounters with the American social gospel. In 1903, for example, he praised a lecture delivered in Newton by Charles M. Sheldon of Topeka, Kansas on the topic, "How Can We Help to Make the World Better?"[15] Wedel's view was not that Mennonites had important lessons to learn from social gospel advocates, but rather that American social gospel proponents were espousing something that had been a part of the *Gemeindechristentum* ever since apostolic times. "The so-called social Christianity has been worked out in exemplary fashion in many Mennonite circles," he wrote.[16] Wedel believed that public life should be "illuminated and influenced by the gospel," and that the denominational religious system of the American republic came close to what Mennonites had wanted for centuries.[17] But Wedel never did systematically describe, analyze or critique American democracy and its emerging urban-industrial order.[18]

II. Ed. G. Kaufman: Mennonite Progressive Sociology

Ed. G. Kaufman, a second-generation child of the Kansas Mennonite German-speaking congregation-christendom, was no less committed than Wedel to the up building of Mennonite community life and culture. But Kaufman's intellectual understanding of community was shaped by American social scientific pragmatism, rather than German dialectical idealism. In

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[14]J. Denny Weaver, *Keeping Salvation Ethical: Mennonite and Amish Atonement Theology in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Scottdale: Herald Press, forthcoming). The corporate congregational understanding of the church is very strong in C. H. Wedel, *Geleitworte an junge Christen* (Newton: Bethel College, 1903).

[15]C.H. Wedel, "Ein Abend mit Charles M. Sheldon," *Monatsblätter aus Bethel College* (March 1903), 28-29.

[16]Wedel, *Geleitworte*, 33-34. Author's translation.

[17]Wedel, *Geleitworte*, 32.

[18]Wedel did not entirely ignore issues of modern labor relations. In his unpublished "Ethik," for example, he wrote, "In industry we stand before a ruthless battle between the powerful and the weak. The workers become lemons that one discards as soon as they have been squeezed out." The foundation and evolution of Wedel's political and social ethics deserve more study.

some ways Kaufman's career paralleled Wedel's—from youthful teaching in Mennonite elementary schools, to a one-term career as a missionary, to an embrace of powerful new ideas taught by graduate school mentors, and finally to the presidency of Bethel College. Kaufman was not as keen and original a thinker as Wedel, but Kaufman was a far more dynamic preacher, effective teacher, and institutional administrator. In personal life and devotion, Kaufman, like Wedel, was deeply pietistic. As a denominational leader he strove to awaken Mennonites to wider ecumenical association and social-political responsibility.[19]

Kaufman learned some elements of progressive-era social science at Bethel College (1912-14, 1915-16), at Kansas University (1914-1915), and at Witmarsum Seminary (1916-1917). His M.A. Thesis at Witmarsum, inspired in part by the Country Life Movement, was a social description of Kansas Mennonite communities. But his great intellectual awakening took place in 1916-18 as he worked toward a Ph.D. Degree in practical theology at the University of Chicago. Among his mentors at the University of Chicago were Archibald Baker, progressive missiologist of "cultural diffusion," and Robert E. Park, sociologist of the influential "Chicago School." Park was a co-author of one of the most influential early sociology textbooks, and taught that societies evolved through stages of competition, conflict, accommodation and assimilation. In Park's class Kaufman became acquainted with Ernst Troeltsch and the concept of the sect cycle. For his Ph.D. dissertation, Kaufman used the concept of the sect cycle to develop the first exposition of Mennonite history grounded in modern social history.[20] His overseas missionary experience had led from an earlier preoccupation with community to an emphasis on the dynamics of social change, outreach, and mission.

Kaufman's dissertation was published in 1931 with the title, *The Development of the Missionary and Philanthropic Interest Among the Mennonites of North America.* Mennonite history, as Kaufman explained it, evolved on a pattern fully predictable by the sect-cycle theory: from initial conflict with the world, to sectarian withdrawal, and finally to new awakenings resulting from renewed contacts with the outside world. The rapid expansion of

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[19]James C. Juhnke, *Creative Crusader: Edmund G. Kaufman and Mennonite Community* (North Newton: Bethel College, 1994).

[20]James C. Juhnke and Leo Driedger, "Balancing Community and Outreach Visions: Edmund George Kaufman, Mennonite Sociologist," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68 (July 1994): 396-417.

institutions for Mennonite missions and benevolence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Kaufman believed, was a direct product of their social evolution. Moreover, it was a desirable product. As Robert Park assumed the beneficence of ethnic and racial group assimilation in American society, so Kaufman assumed that the flowering of Mennonite denominational growth and outreach was to be welcomed and celebrated. The discipline of sociology, at least at this moment of its development in America, could claim to be scientifically objective at the same time that it endorsed the general tendency of American social development.[21]

In 1928, coming out of the University of Chicago, Kaufman viewed himself academically as a teacher of sociology. He hoped to use social research as an instrument for the renewal of Mennonite identity and mission. These plans were cut short in 1932 when he accepted the presidency of Bethel College. As president he worked to develop Bethel's social science department, as well as to do everything in his power to strengthen the Mennonite tradition by training and recruiting leaders for the churches. He helped to found new agencies and programs for Mennonite renewal: a Mennonite museum, a Mennonite historical library, a Mennonite quarterly periodical, a Menno Simons lecture series, and more. During his twenty years as president his part-time teaching focus shifted from the social sciences to the Bible and religion department. His favorite course, which became something of a legend in the school's history, was a capstone required of all seniors, "Basic Christian Convictions."

In the years leading up to World War II, Mennonite progressives such as Kaufman gave much attention to issues of war and peace. He was a faithful reader of the *Christian Century*, edited by Charles Clayton Morrison, who had a strong liberal pacifist bias. Like many in the *Christian Century* circle, Kaufman believed that the rise of democracy was linked to progress towards peace and that the United States had led the way in this direction. The war system, Kaufman wrote in one summary statement, "is the great sin of our common humanity and must be banished from the earth in the interest of human personality and the Kingdom of Christ. The time must come when Christians everywhere will recognize the duty of cooperating with God in

[21]Stow Persons, *Ethnic Studies at Chicago, 1905-45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), ch. 2.

the accomplishment of this task."[22] In 1941 Kaufman had to part company with Morrison after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and American entry into the war. Morrison proclaimed the war an "Unnecessary Necessity," and chose to stand with the country in the war effort. But Kaufman chose to stand in the tradition of his pacifist people. "In the time of war, especially," he said, "the Sermon on the Mount is the supreme sermon."[23] The war temporarily separated Kaufman from liberal American Protestants and strengthened his ties with other Mennonite groups and the historic peace churches.

World War II and its awful demonstration of the power of human evil was a blow to Kaufman's way of thinking, but he made no fundamental change in his theological orientation. The triumph of the kingdom of God on earth would take much longer than he had assumed as a young man, but the Christian obligation to hope and to work for that kingdom remained undiminished. After leaving the Bethel presidency in 1952 Kaufman wrote five books and edited one. Four of these books were written from within the Mennonite religious-ethnic tradition and dealt with Mennonite family history/genealogy, Mennonite institutions, and Mennonite biography. Two additional books had a broader ecumenical Christian character, designed to frame theological issues in ways with distinctive Anabaptist-Mennonite emphases. Kaufman's two books of this type were *Living Creatively* (1966), and *Basic Christian Convictions* (1972). Like C.H. Wedel's meditations on the catechism, Kaufman endeavored to make the Christian faith winsome and persuasive for educated young Mennonites who would live in the modern American environment.

Kaufman's broader Christian ecumenical books did not, for the most part, highlight the particular details or distinctive doctrines of Anabaptism or Mennonitism. The first of these, titled *Living Creatively*, was a collection of thirteen sermons and lectures, most of which he had presented at Bethel College baccalaureate exercises. The title essay was Kaufman's progressive educational manifesto. He had presented it first in the spring of 1929 as a commencement address at Bethel College, when he was still employed at Bluffton College. Twenty-two years later, in the fall

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[22]"The Peace Principle, 1937-38," Bethel College class summary, p. 37, copy at Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

[23]Ed. G. Kaufman, Chapel Speech, 25 September 1939. Kaufman papers, box 39, folder 504, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas.

of 1951, Kaufman used the same address, virtually unchanged, for the opening of school in his final year as president.

With soaring rhetoric he called his audience to make a creative contribution to the emerging Christian world civilization. The world stood at a moment of crisis, and the potential for disaster was real. Unregulated science and materialism were demonic dangers, but Christ-like motives and creative thinking could transform the world. Through Jesus Christ "a strong catalyzing energy had been introduced into the spiritual chemistry of civilization." That same energy was available to Christ's progressive disciples in the twentieth century. Kaufman concluded the essay with an oblique reference to Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage: "And so, in time, that creative crusade of His took captive your forefathers and mine. Yes, the glory of the Christian experience across the centuries has ever been its creative, triumphant, and crusading souls."[24] Kaufman's vision of education as a creative crusade remained constant in the face of the great disasters of the twentieth century—worldwide economic depression, political totalitarianism, and catastrophic warfare. The Christianization of the world in a single generation, anticipated in Ed's youth, may have been indefinitely delayed. But fruitful creative endeavor, he never stopped believing, remained possible.

Ed Kaufman's ecumenical Christian magnum opus, *Basic Christian Convictions*, was not published until 1972, after his eightieth birthday. Again, the book was a product of his teaching at Bethel College and of his goal to project an expansive vision for Mennonites. Kaufman explained the rise of religions in general and the Biblical story in particular in terms of social evolution such as he had learned at the University of Chicago many years earlier. The concept of God evolved out of narrow tribalistic images in the Old Testament to an exalted fulfillment in Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Christ, the embodiment of the principle of sacrificial love, was the center of history and of religious understanding. Socially and politically this meant that self-denying cooperation was more "sane and effective" than struggle and conflict. Kropotkin's call for mutual aid was a needed corrective to Darwin's survival of the fittest. In Kaufman's words, "Sacrificial love is then the most important principle that

[24]Kaufman, "Creative Education," *Bethel College Monthly* (15 June 1929).

God uses in sustaining and governing the world in His providence to promote His Kingdom among men."[25]

In nearly all chapters of *Basic Christian Convictions*, Kaufman's method of presentation was to present alternative interpretations of major doctrines or texts, and to suggest the strengths and weaknesses of various options. This relatively non-dogmatic approach had characterized his teaching as well. On the doctrine of the atonement, for example, he explained the three main options, all of which could be supported by Scripture and located in Christian history: Ransom, Vicarious-Substitution, and Moral Influence. All three theories were, he wrote, "helpful in understanding the meaning of salvation." But his preference for the Moral Influence theory of atonement (that Christ's incarnation manifested divine love in order to win humans back to obedience to God) was evident both in his review of each position and in his explanation of other doctrines.[26]

For the final chapter of *Basic Christian Convictions*, "The Christian Life," however, Kaufman's method of presentation became more confessional, prescriptive, dogmatic and driven by incontrovertible proof texts. "Salvation means a certain way of life," he wrote, and he described that life in terms of authoritative requirements rather than of theoretical options. Discipleship was costly, involving self-renunciation in life choices, including career and education. Growth in the Christian life *required* prayer, Bible study, and active church membership. The conclusion of Kaufman's book reflected the strong Anabaptist-Pietist emphasis of his community tradition. Christian faith must be expressed in actual living.

Kaufman's general Christian writings, while written for Mennonites, did not overtly attempt to promote or establish Mennonite identity for his readers. He rather assumed his readers already were Mennonites as he had assumed for the great majority of his students at Bethel College. The specific promotion of Mennonite identity was an urgent task for the church and the college, but for Kaufman it was not a task best undertaken through the statement of basic Christian doctrine. Mennonites were orthodox trinitarian Christians who needed to see themselves in the framework of classical Christian history and

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[25]Edmund G. Kaufman, *Basic Christian Convictions* (North Newton: Bethel College, 1972), 78-79.

[26]Kaufman, *Basic*, 155-61.

theology. Kaufman even included a favorable reference to the historic church creeds which "express the mind of the Church."[27]

Some Mennonite scholars in recent years have debated about whether there was, or should be, such a thing as a separate and distinctive "Mennonite theology." Ed Kaufman, and even more his son, Gordon, represented the ecumenical or classical side, rather than the sectarian or separatist side, of that question.[28] The Kaufmans wrote Christian theology with Mennonite accents. From a "Mennonite theology" viewpoint, Ed Kaufman may be vulnerable to charges that he separated salvation from ethics[29], or that he failed to give adequate attention to church/state doctrines. From an ecumenical-Christian theological perspective, Kaufman may be credited for his effort to state broader theological issues in ways consistent with an authentic Anabaptist-Mennonite call for outward witness and mission in the world.

III. Conclusion

It would be possible to exaggerate the continuities of this three-generation sequence from Wedel to Kaufman to Kaufman. Ed Kaufman honored C.H. Wedel as a Mennonite pioneer and forefather, but he did not quote Wedel's works, nor build on his ideas as a specific outgrowth of the *Gemeindechristentum* idea. There was substantial discontinuity between Wedel's dialectical idealism and Kaufman's evolutionary social scientific approach to history. In the same way, Gordon Kaufman had a positive relationship with his father, and in a limited sense recapitulated Ed's intellectual pilgrimage by earning an M.A. in sociology before embarking upon his theological career. But the younger Kaufman did not explicitly refer to his father's writings in his theological pilgrimage en route toward *In Face of Mystery*.

Nevertheless, some continuities and commonalities deserve notice. In all these men there is a reach for unity and comprehensiveness rather than for sectarian separation, an affirmation of Mennonite responsibility for human culture and the public order, a willingness to embrace modern methods of

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[27]Kaufman, *Basic*, 204.

[28]For two representative articles on this dialogue, see J. Denny Weaver, "Mennonites: Theology, Peace, and Identity," *The Conrad Grebel Review* (Spring 1988): 119-145, and A. James Reimer, "Toward Christian Theology from a Diversity of Mennonite Perspectives," *The Conrad Grebel Review* (Spring 1988): 147-159.

[29]See, for example, Kristel Shutt James, "Edmund George Kaufman: Atonement and Ethics," Bluffton College Research Paper, 1987.

social science and history, a theological insistence that faith must find concrete expression in daily life, and a focus upon Christ as the central symbol and reality of the Christian faith. That there were limitations and blind spots in each generation of this tradition should not be denied. To bring together and fruitfully reconcile the particular traditions of a given social-religious group with the necessarily universal dimensions of Christian theology is a daunting challenge for any denomination or confessional group at any point in history.

We may gain historical perspective by seeing C.H. Wedel, Ed. G. Kaufman and Gordon Kaufman as part of a larger ongoing tradition. That tradition needs further study. Not only did these three men differ from each other in important ways, but they made some interesting shifts in their own lifetimes. One intriguing question is why both Wedel and the elder Kaufman seemed to shift gradually away from concepts that were so important for their early works—the "*Gemeindechristentum*" and the "sect cycle." In any case, the exemplars of the Mennonite "cultural engagement" tradition deserve to be seen in terms of the positive dimensions of their own visions, rather than as a reaction against other presumedly normative expressions of a more intentionally separate-from-the-world Anabaptist-Mennonitism.

Chapter 3

Gordon Kaufman's Thought: A Monument to Modernity

Donald Stoesz

Gordon Kaufman's *Systematic Theology*[1] served as the primary theological reference work during the time this author attended Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg, Manitoba (1972-1975). Kaufman's essays on method and imaginative construction[2] were also used for purposes of comparison at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana during the 1970's and 80's. One could thus argue that no matter how Kaufman is perceived by the Mennonite church today, he has had a significant impact on its scholars, particularly in his emphasis on an integrated approach to theology, ethics, and higher education.

The question remains, 25 years after the publication of his first *magnum opus* and on the heels of his latest one, *In Face of Mystery*[3]: Where does Kaufman fit within the grand scheme of things and what influence can he expect to enjoy in the future?

I. Kaufman as an Enlightenment Thinker

The best way of answering this query is to situate Kaufman in relation to modernity. If the Reformation issued a clarion call to return to Scriptural authority as a result of the corruption of tradition, the Enlightenment demonstrated how both of these authorities are dependent upon the rational and social structures of the mind. The conceptual frameworks that inform biblical interpretation and religious belief require identification.

Kaufman is a thoroughgoing modern person in the sense that he considers the Enlightenment to be a crucial turning point for Christianity. The revolutionary idea that human beings create culture rather than the other way around means that Scripture and tradition are subject to scrutinization. Nothing is sacred in

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[1]*Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968).

[2]*An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975); *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

[3]*In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

the sense that everything human beings believe is something they have internalized, rather than something they have allowed to be imposed from the outside.[4]

The divine sanctity of Christianity is thus relativized by the simple fact that the Bible was written by human hands and that the Trinity is a theological concept that was conceived of and confirmed by the church. If believers are the ones who constituted tradition in the first place, it is certainly possible for their great-great-great-grandchildren to rethink, reshape, and even reject their heritage.

Kaufman therefore stands in solidarity with the modern project. He regards two of its key elements, reflective internalization and critical appropriation, as crucial for coming to terms with God as the metaphysical ground of reality.

II. The Priority of Epistemology

A more specific framework is needed to pinpoint Kaufman's affirmation of modernity. At least four alternatives are available. Some contemporary theologians regard the Enlightenment as an unfortunate hiatus in the much longer history of Christianity. John Macquarrie and Paul Ricoeur continue to speak about believers participating in a primeval order of reality that precedes human beings' capacity to oppose themselves as subjects in relation to other realities. Christians can be restored in an unmediated way to God, the Ground of all being.[5]

A phenomenological variant of this ontological premise has to do with the importance of religious experience in expressing these fundamental encounters. At the beginning of this century, Rudolf Otto argued that believers' experiences of awe in the presence of God represented a *sui generis* foundation on which to study religion.[6] The phenomenological movement has since devoted itself to identifying and describing what it considers to be the essential aspects of different religions.

Scholars from the social sciences have taken a more functional, institutional approach to religious phenomena. Social manifestations rather than the expressions of faith themselves

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[4]For a history of this shift in thinking, see Jeffrey Stout, *Flight from Authority* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[5]See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 101-104.

[6]Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).

represent the barometer of measurement. Peter Berger and Robert Bellah have focused on the infrastructures of society in order to arrive at symbols of meaning that reflect the superstructure.[7]

Finally, George Lindbeck has identified a cultural-linguistic method which he believes safeguards the doctrines and practices of the church.[8] Neither phenomenological nor social analyses are adequate because they pay insufficient attention to the way in which Scriptural and traditional Words of the church shape the lives of its members. Experiential and behavioral considerations remain tied to their conceptual counterparts.

Of these four options, Kaufman is closest to Lindbeck in that he considers the epistemological framework to be indispensable for understanding the faith process. Large portions of *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith*[9] and *In Face of Mystery* are devoted to the steps of faith that are required for a person to come to terms with the metaphysical aspects of life. Like Lindbeck, Kaufman firmly believes that getting the theoretical superstructure right will contribute to the survival of theology, belief in God, and in Lindbeck's case, the future of the church.

Two important differences between Kaufman and Lindbeck remain. Whereas Lindbeck continues to put his faith in the functional, if not substantial role of doctrine, Kaufman submits that the categorical scheme of Kant is more useful in isolating the metaphysical presuppositions by which all contemporaries live. The concepts of God, world, humanity, and Christ are profound enough to make the secular person think twice and broad enough to be linked to key precepts of other religions.

Kaufman is also more historicist than Lindbeck in that he believes the exchange of traditional doctrine for more contemporary categories is demanded by modernity. While the Reformation informs Lindbeck's openness to rethink certain beliefs, the impact of the Enlightenment has convinced Kaufman that a full-scale restructuring is required. The "world hypotheses" that have influenced twentieth century believers are different from the ones that shaped the sixteenth century and different yet again from the milieu of the Middle Ages and early Christian church.

The Cartesian preoccupation with the thinking human subject thus forms the basis of Kaufman's thought. This ideational

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[7]Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

[8]George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

[9](Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

approach resonates with ontology and phenomenology insofar as it is concerned with fundamental structures of meaning.[10] Kaufman's epistemology is also similar to the social sciences in that research is considered to be an integral part of identifying the underlying paradigms of an era.

Kaufman nevertheless considers the efforts of ontologists to get behind language, the assumption of the primary nature of religious experience on the part of phenomenologists, and the positivistic bent of the social sciences to be misplaced. Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena along with his insight into the value-laden nature of knowledge means that a believer's conscious reflection upon his or her most basic presuppositions represents the most significant aspect of the faith process.

III. Kaufman's Epistemological Defense of Neo-Orthodoxy

What does the above methodological analysis have to do with theology? Does it make a difference that Kaufman regards epistemology as more important than ontology or phenomenology?

The best way of answering this question is to situate Kaufman in terms of his neo-orthodox training. His teacher, H. Richard Niebuhr, was a confessional theologian in the sense that he did not feel the need to ground his theology of revelation on a philosophical basis. After all, the nineteenth century's optimistic assessment of human beings' ability to communicate had given way to two world wars and the concomitant distrust by Karl Barth of any rapprochement between Christianity and the faith of national socialism. H. Richard Niebuhr was equally reticent about Christians finding their "structures" of faith within the human sciences.[11]

Times had changed by the 1950's. The United States' new role as a world leader was reflected by a more active interest on the part of American theologians in the political process (e.g. Reinhold Niebuhr). For his part, Gordon Kaufman felt the best service he could render his teacher was to show how neo-orthodoxy's emphasis on God's revelation, far from being an

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[10]For an interesting review of the systematic theologies of John Macquarrie and Gordon Kaufman, see George Hendry, "Untimely Systems," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 62/2 (1969): 12-19.

[11]H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941).

arbitrary pronouncement, could be linked to current theories of knowledge.

Kaufman set out to demonstrate how the idea of God's self-disclosure was based on an epistemological model of consciousness. A child experiences many limits in his or her exploration of the world.[12] These frontiers make the person aware of his or her own subjectivity as well as curious about the meaning of these limits. In the case of natural objects, research can be done to ascertain the substance and parameters of these barriers. Human beings are more difficult to understand because like the child, they retain a self-consciousness that does not have to be exposed.

God can thus be conceived as a "super-human" subject who reveals the divine character in a progressive manner.[13] God remains fundamentally mysterious because there is much about the divine will that human beings can not comprehend. At the same time, God's creation of the world, appearances to Abraham, Moses and the Jews, and incarnation in Jesus Christ are concrete manifestations of God's intentions. The divine otherness is retained within the teleological direction upon which God has embarked.[14]

IV. Duality as the Achilles Heel of the Enlightenment

This correlation of revelation and epistemology appeared to be a *tour de force* that extended and transformed the neo-orthodox movement in a North American context. In contrast to the metaphysical and hermeneutical preoccupations of the Continent, Kaufman's historicist project met the needs of America's pragmatic orientation.[15]

The problem was that Kaufman's theological model was based on a fatal flaw of the Enlightenment, namely its dualism. Descartes' dictum, "I think, therefore I am," contributed to the idea that human beings could be separated into two compartments, mind and body, subject and object, thinker and actor. Kaufman had used this duality of hiddenness and disclosure to develop his analogy of divine revelation.

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[12]Gordon Kaufman, *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 27-52.

[13]Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology*, 13-56.

[14]Ibid., 105-116.

[15]William Dean makes this point in *History Making History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 1-22, 140-144.

Social scientists have demonstrated the fallacy of this assumption. Freud showed through his psychological experiments how behavior is linked to the subconscious. Emile Durkheim discovered how even such a personal matter as suicide is reflective of the collective tensions of society.[16] Greater integrity exists between intentionality and action than philosophers had imagined.

V. The Realistic Vein of Kaufman's Thought

Michael McLain brought this problem of a disembodied ego to Kaufman's attention in an 1969 article, "On Theological Models."[17] He suggested that Kaufman shift his view of God as Subject to that of divine Agent in order to account for the realistic aspects of God's presence in the world.

Kaufman obliged by building on a teleological analogy he had used in his *Systematic Theology*[18] and expanding it to include the idea of the acts of God within a naturalistic worldview.[19] Historical events that furthered God's purposes could be referred to as "simple" or "subordinate acts" that lent credibility to the work of God through the whole course of history, known formally as the divine "master-act."

This realistic emphasis has remained a part of Kaufman's agenda. In *An Essay on Theological Method*, he reiterates the fact that experiences and events play a fundamental role in one's conception and reconception of the ultimately Real.[20] Kaufman also devotes a chapter in *The Theological Imagination* to the theological implications of nature and states forthrightly that God "is related to every segment and every dimension of our experience and world."[21]

Kaufman goes even further in *Theology for a Nuclear Age* when he shows how the sovereignty of God is linked to the response of human beings. Even though God created the universe and "sent Jesus Christ" to redeem the world, a declaration of nuclear war or a significant ecological disaster would place this partly

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[16]For an overview, see Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 115-139.

[17]*Harvard Theological Review* 62 (1969): 155-187.

[18]Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology*, 256-265.

[19]Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem*, 135-147.

[20]Gordon Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method*, 58.

[21]Gordon Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination*, 209-237, 275.

realized goal of reconciliation into jeopardy.[22] God's dependency upon the very purposes the Godself embarked on in the first place reveals a profound vulnerability in the face of human rebellion and evil.

VI. Kaufman as an Idealistic, Moral Theologian

This interdependency of God and nature has prompted William Dean to refer to Kaufman as a "postmodern realist" who is committed to a naturalistic historicism in which theological statements are subjected to empirical verification.[23] As Kaufman himself has said, historical changes "call for, even force upon us, changes in religious symbolism."[24]

This author is nevertheless convinced that at bottom, Kaufman remains an idealistic, moral theologian who considers the theoretical framework of knowledge to be a greater priority than either experiences and expressions of faith or their social and institutional manifestations.[25] Kant and neo-orthodoxy have convinced Kaufman that God is so far away that the best believers can do is to come to terms with the ultimately Real through the mediation of language.

It is for this reason that Kaufman spends so much time tracing the rise of consciousness in *Relativism, Knowledge and Faith* and *In Face of Mystery*.[26] He believes that a reflective analysis of one's fundamental presuppositions is all that is needed for a modern, secular person to believe in God. Once the scientifically oriented person has realized that an ultimate Limit is in fact presupposed by his or her natural worldview, he or she will be more disposed toward metaphysics and belief.

Kant's epistemology is also the reason Kaufman has spent the last twenty years developing a categorical scheme. In contrast to those who claim that God can be experienced directly, Kaufman maintains that "God" represents a comprehensive idea that

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[22]Gordon Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 30-46.

[23]William Dean, *History Making History*, 140-141.

[24]Gordon Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 9.

[25]For similar views on the subject, see James Gustafson, "Theological Anthropology and the Human Sciences," and John Cobb, "In Defense of Realism," both published in Sheila Greeve Davaney, ed., *Theology at the End of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1991), 61-80, 179-200.

[26]See especially the two diagrams in *In Face of Mystery*, 178, 287.

regulates the manner in which human beings think about ultimacy. The concepts of "world" and "human" are similar to "God" in that they denote abstract totalities rather than refer in a specific manner to this universe or that individual.

These three categories are useful in explaining a believer's faith journey. Experience of the "world" as limit causes a person to reflect on the possibility of another frontier that relativizes the magnitude and fearfulness of life. "God" fulfills this function by putting the universe back into its proper place while providing a gracious niche for human beings *within* this globe.

The dilemma Christianity raises for this categorical scheme is that Jesus was not just a human being in the abstract but a historical figure who changed Judaism, inaugurated the Christian era, and transformed the manner in which believers think about God. The incorporation of this specificity within an abstract framework is not self-evident.

Kaufman maintains that the separation of "Christ" from "Jesus" enables the former word to stand as a conceptual modifier of the other three categories. Each religion has a "Christ" event in the sense that there are historical antecedents to each form of faith.[27] The idea of "Christ" serves as the entry point for the particularities of each religion, in terms of which the triangular structure of God, world, and humanity can be related.[28]

Believers are thus presented with a fourfold categorical scheme that replaces traditional doctrines on the one hand, while serving as a modern metaphysical foundation of orientation for believers on the other hand.

VII. The Sustaining Force of Idealizing Symbols

Is this contemporary reformulation an adequate basis for Christians to take into the twenty-first century? Has there been a significant enough paradigm shift that Christians can no longer "get back to the Bible" and "see Jesus," but have to rethink their faith in contemporary categories? Kaufman, for one, believes that this reconstruction will not only sustain the future of Christianity,

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[27]Gordon Kaufman, *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith*, 109.

[28]This fourfold categorical scheme enables the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth significantly to modify the manner in which Christian believers envision God. Yet it should be remembered that even here, Kaufman is reticent in placing too much priority on *the man Jesus*. To say Jesus is the Christ means that he is a normative paradigm that can be linked to other salvific and redemptive events in the course of history.

but provide a common basis of dialogue among at least the monotheistic religions.

The easiest way for this author to assess Kaufman's contribution is to suggest that he has provided a grand normative vision of how human beings are to live. The sacrificial life of Jesus, the reconciliation of the world to God, and the patience and compassion of the Godself are fundamental not only for Christian believers, but for all religions and their relationship to the ultimately Real.

Kaufman appears in this regard to have accepted something he rejected earlier in his career, namely a kind of transcendental teleology in which his categorical scheme is intended to "lure" people to a theocentric commitment to the world.[29]

One is reminded of John Cobb's profound analysis of God as "the One Who Calls," not is some abstract way, but as rooted within the very possibility or potential of human beings themselves:[30]

> . . . it is precisely the call to be something more than we have been which initiates and activates every new act of being by which we constitute ourselves. Perhaps it is just this ever-novel lure that is the Source of the order exhibited by nature and the Ground of our moral obligation. . . . That means that the Creator-Lord of history is not the all-determinate cause of the course of natural and historical events, but a lover of the world who calls it ever beyond what it has attained by affirming life, novelty, consciousness, and freedom again and again.

The difficulty with Kaufman's rendition of this compelling image of God is that his idealizing symbols become too easily separated from the prevenient God of grace with whom we all have to deal. Kaufman speaks at one point about the God of mystery breaking in and establishing faith when believers recognize their inability to "know God" and repent of their attempts to "overcome and control the mystery within which we live."[31]

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[29]Compare *In Face of Mystery*, 53-55, and *God the Problem*, 75-76.

[30]John Cobb, *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 65. Cf. David Mason, "Can We Speculate on How God Acts?" *Journal of Religion* (1977): 16-32, and David Griffen, "Gordon Kaufman's Theology: Some Questions," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (1973): 554-572.

[31]Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 57.

This acquiescent response, however, is more often than not overshadowed by Kaufman's rejuvenated appeal to accomplish exactly what he has just finished saying is impossible, namely for Christians to live by the paradigmatic ideals of love, justice, and freedom that the presence of God and life of Jesus reflects.

Evidence of this normative imbalance can be found in the very title of Kaufman's new book. "In face of mystery" implies that believers' encounters with God are so overwhelming that they are compelled to construct images that are reflective of this epiphany, incorporate these ideas into a comprehensive whole, and commit themselves to working within this framework in order that they may "still live after having seen God."[32]

This domestication of experience through language is the reason Kaufman spends so much time defending himself against charges of "projection" and "reification."[33] In spite of the fact that these imaginative constructions can be viewed as part of an Anselmic "faith seeking understanding," Kaufman's way of putting the matter *sounds* very much like believers are "projecting images of God onto the sky" (Feuerbach) in order to cope with life and objectifying these ideals in order to endow them with some realistic force.[34]

Kaufman's categorical scheme has thus been transformed from a theological response to the serendipitous creativity that sustains the world to a Promethean retort to the ambiguities of life that places human beings front and center. Kaufman's equivocal attempt to trace a fine line between these radically different trajectories is the reason so many theologians have accused him of denying the prior work of God's grace.[35]

A contributing factor to these criticisms pertains to the voluntaristic underpinnings of Kaufman's Mennonite heritage and Kantian influence. The Anabaptist accent on discipleship and adult baptism leads to Kaufman's definition of faith as commitment, while Kant's universal imperative prompts Kaufman to broaden his categorical scheme to include other

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[32]See Deuteronomy 5:24, 34:10.

[33]Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 322-340.

[34]See Van Austin Harvey, "Feuerbach on Religion as Construction," in *Theology at the End of Modernity*, 249-268.

[35]Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985), 54-56, 159n.22; Garrett Green, "Reconstructing Christian Theology," *Religious Studies Review* (1983), 221; and Bruce McCormick, "Divine Revelation and Human Imagination: Must We Choose Between the Two?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* (1984): 431-455.

religions.[36] The reader is thus left with increasingly vacuous ideals that have ever-decreasing impetus. Belief in God, like commitment to freedom and justice, has to be socially and experientially grounded.[37]

VIII. Three Imaginatively Acceptable Alternatives

Do these criticisms mean that there is nothing left for scholars who wish to incorporate some of Kaufman's ideas into their own theologies and methods? Has Kaufman's theology become nothing more than a moralistic deontology set within an evolutionary framework of progress, reminiscent of Kant's second and third critiques?[38]

This author would like to suggest that at least three tributaries are available to the voyager who is reluctant to follow Kaufman to the end of his Kantian trajectory, but who still prefers his cultural-linguistic approach to ontological avenues of exploration.

The first proposal revives the idea of disclosure and sets it within a more realistic framework. Emmanuel Levinas, a Jewish thinker and Holocaust survivor, has suggested that all totalities are relativized by the infinity of the divine, which for Levinas takes the form of a secular transcendence through the image of another person's face.[39] The reality of the other person, be that a widow, stranger, or orphan, places an ethical claim on all human beings, subverting the importance of the self in the process.

The benefit of this analogy of the human "other" is that it escapes the subjectivity of internal intentionality as well as the flight of transcendence into another world. Ethical and theological discussions are set within the context of the priority of other people's experiences and situations. Divine interiority and human

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[36]Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 345-347, 407.

[37]Another person who has wrestled with the problem of replacing oppressive theological images with metaphors that have enough staying power to reflect the prevenient nature of God's grace is Sallie McFague. Cf. her discussion in *Models of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 21-40.

[38]Cf. Michel Despland, *Kant on History and Religion* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1973).

[39]Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); cf. Robert Bernasconi and Tina Chanter, "The Face of the Other," *Religious Studies Review* 16/3 (1990): 227-232.

existentialism pale before the real needs and tragic faces of others.[40]

A second avenue of exploration involves the interruption of theological imagination at the point of its deconstruction. The value of the method of deconstruction lies in its ability to take the Scriptures seriously while relativizing their significance through a process of "distanciation."[41] Identifying the patriarchal nature and imperialistic tendencies of the Hebrew Bible enables the theologian to place some distance between herself and the text while at the same time exposing the thoroughly modern lenses by means of which this text is being analyzed.[42]

A third option would be to solicit the support of the social sciences in specifying the institutional manifestations of God's presence in the world. H. Richard Niebuhr always insisted on knowing what was going on before making reflective ethical judgments.[43] It would thus seem appropriate to investigate the current state of affairs in North American Christianity before proceeding with one's own systematic theology.[44]

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[40]See Thomas Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). This author has utilized some of Levinas' ideas in "The Significance of the 'Other' for Prison Ministry," presented to the Canadian Theological Society meetings in Ottawa, June 8, 1993.

[41]Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 131-144. See also the very concise and clear analysis by Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1982).

[42]Mieke Bal's work on Judges and the paintings of Rembrandt is one of the better examples of deconstructive analysis, see *Death and Dissymmetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) and *Reading "Rembrandt"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). This author has developed some of her ideas in "Violence Against Women as the Tragic Result of Male Ambiguity in the Book of Judges," presented to the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, June, 1993.

[43]H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1963), 60.

[44]This author has taken some of these criticisms to heart in his Ph.D. dissertation on Gordon Kaufman. See especially the section on ecclesiology and civil religion, Donald Stoesz, "The Confessional and Apologetic Aspects of Gordon Kaufman's Thought: An Interpretation," (Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University, 1991), 293-319. See also Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), and Gregory Baum, *Theology and Society* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

IX. The Future of Mennonite Theologies

A final question: How do Kaufman's thought and the above proposals relate to the numerous Mennonite theologies that have arisen in the last few years?

Two of the more decisive options available are (1) Jim Reimer's metaphysical-ontological corrective to the ethical, historicist, and eschatological preoccupations of Anabaptism, and (2) the post-Constantinian, postmodern narrative approaches associated with John Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and James McClendon.[45]

Both alternatives represent a rejection of modernity in the sense that Jim Reimer considers the sixteen hundred years that preceded the Enlightenment to be a significant modifier of the last four hundred years. Postmodern thinkers, in turn, wish to correct modernity on the basis of a radicalized version of the Protestant principle. Scripture and discipleship are hallmarks of the latter group while tradition and doctrine play a more decisive role in Jim Reimer's theology.

Modernity itself mediates a rapprochement between these two extremes. On the one hand, narrative theologians are making use of literary, sociological, and psychological theories to support their hermeneutical stance.[46] On the other hand, neo-orthodox theologians enlist phenomenological frameworks to show how religious experiences put believers "in touch" with God.[47] Meanwhile, philosophers of religion write epistemological

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[45]A. James Reimer, "The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1 (1983): 33-55; John Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

[46]George Lindbeck appeals to history, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy in support of his cultural-linguistic approach, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 25. Cf. Hans Frei's nuanced discussion of this point in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) and *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[47]Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Man: A Social Phenomenology of Faith and Reality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

For an interesting discussion of the significance of the Enlightenment for neo-orthodox theology, see Gregory Baum, *The Church in Quebec* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1991), 125-130. Baum asks whether Douglas Hall stands together with George Grant in the latter's rejection of the Enlightenment or whether modernity is precisely what makes Hall's thought contextual. Hall has just completed two major works that have to do with "Christian Theology in a North American Context," *Thinking the Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1989) and *Professing the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

treatises to illustrate the formative function of doctrine[48] and the rationality of believing in God.[49]

The social and human sciences—direct offspring of the Enlightenment—thus play a major role in the formulation of all theologies. Regardless of whether one is Anabaptist or Anglican, is interested in origins or the future, durable experiential, sociological, and epistemological theories are required for coming to terms with believers' encounters with God. Kaufman's modernistic theology and the three trajectories elucidated above tackle the issues of the Enlightenment head-on, and thus have greater resilience than the other options presented as viable Mennonite, that is to say, Christian, theologies.

[48]William Christian, *Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study* (New Haven: Yale University, 1987).

[49]Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Rational?" in C.F. Delaney, ed., *Rationality and Religious Belief* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 7-27.

Theological Methodology

Chapter 4

Imagination/Tradition: Disjunction or Conjunction?

Harry Huebner

There has been much discussion recently on the options available to postmodern theologians.[1] Unfortunately, very little agreement has been forthcoming. Yet many scholars believe that success on this front remains a major challenge for contemporary theology. Here Gordon Kaufman's work ranks among the most ambitious and significant, and certainly deserves our most careful scrutiny.

Roughly characterized, the terms "modern" and "postmodern" designate epochs of intellectual history and philosophical/theological methods which criticized and largely rejected the approaches of their predecessors. Moderns, also sometimes called Enlightenment thinkers or liberals, attacked the Middle Ages for its excessive reliance on tradition and church authority and the grounding of human knowledge in God. While the premoderns simply found it inconceivable to speak of knowledge apart from an affirmation of God, moderns like Descartes, Hume and Kant considered this to be epistemologically unjustifiable. After all, Christian knowledge claims themselves, especially the claim to know God, require justification. And once tradition was rejected as an unsound epistemological anchor, abstract human rationality became its substitute. The beauty of such rationality as a criterion of knowledge, at least so thought Descartes, et. al., was that it provided a foundation which transcended culture, tradition and other such "biased authorities."

Postmoderns have responded to the modernist claim which grounds all in universal rationality with much the same distrust as did the moderns in their rejection of tradition and God. What, after all, is trustworthy about reason, they ask. Postmoderns are quick to point out, as their gurus Nietzsche and Foucault have taught them, that interpretive frameworks (conceptual schemes) are undergirded by political and even personal self-interest. Hence, knowledge cannot be separated from issues of power and perspective. Postmoderns argue that there is no such thing as a

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[1]Two examples are: Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Options in Post-Modern Theology," *Dialog* 26, 196-200; and J. Bottum, "Christians and Postmoderns," *First Things* (February 1994): 28-32.

disinterested universal rational standpoint. About this the Enlightenment thinkers and the post-enlightenment liberals are misguided at best and deceitful at worst. Hence, "suspicion" and "subversion" are the new postmodern watchwords.

It has recently been pointed out that postmodern thinkers are in two respects more like the premoderns than they are like the moderns. First, J. Bottum has argued the connection as follows: premoderns believed that knowledge was only possible based on their belief in God. Moderns believed that knowledge of God must also be subjected to the canons of reason and hence for the first time in western intellectual history a wedge was driven between theology and philosophy. Some postmoderns readily accept the premodern claim that human knowledge presupposes God but then they add that since God cannot be known, human knowledge also is not possible. All we have are perspectives and values which shape our conceptual schemes, and our claims to knowledge have no verification possibilities apart from criteria of coherence and pragmatics. The second similarity between pre- and postmodernism is suggested by William Dean.[2] He contends that by becoming ever more relativistic and pluralistic, postmoderns have ironically reintroduced just those problems that modern theology was supposed to overcome. Postmoderns really have nowhere to turn any more for a theological base. Hence, some, like George Lindbeck, using postmodern arguments based on Wittgensteinian language-game theory, have resorted afresh to such premodern notions as biblical authority and the church.

The argument, of course, is far from settled. Kaufman's writings are an attempt to find a way through this conundrum by presenting a careful analysis of the way in which theology has been done in the past and by proposing a drastic reconstruction of the basic theological conceptual frame as a way of rescuing theology from contemporary irrelevance. Unlike some postmoderns, he is not convinced that anything is gained by moving historically backward in search of a viable method and hence he rejects all association with the tradition of premodernism. Yet he is not ready to abandon the business of theology entirely like some other postmoderns are prepared to do.

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[2]William Dean, "Humanistic Historicism and Naturalistic Historicism," in Sheila Greeve Davaney, ed., *Theology at the End of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press, 1991), 41-59.

This essay will focus specifically on Kaufman's understanding of theological method. It will do this by offering a comparison with another American scholar who unfortunately does not get enough attention in theological method discussions, namely, the Christian philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre is working at many of the same problems as Kaufman, only MacIntyre's proposed solution finds a constructive role for tradition and truth whereas Kaufman's does not.

I

Kaufman began his academic career attempting to establish an epistemological base for theology. Already in his first book, *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith*, he wrestles with the problems of theological method and the challenges of modernity.[3] Perhaps it is more than coincidence that he cites at the very beginning of this book the great French medievalist and metaphysician, Etienne Gilson, "by his very nature, man is a metaphysical animal" and the German historicist, Wilhelm Dilthey, "*Die Weltgeschichte als das Weltgericht* shows every metaphysical system to be relative, superseded, transitory." Certainly the tension inherent in these two statements has set the stage for Kaufman's entire writing career.

In his 1968 *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*, Kaufman valiantly applied the historicist model to the traditional discipline of theology.[4] Although the approach was somewhat unusual, the traditional language of theology remained largely intact. Four years later we get the first glimpse of a significant shift in methodology. In *God the Problem* much more explicit language of construction is employed symbolizing a move away from nineteenth century historicism to a more explicit Kantian ahistorical critical idealism. Here he emphasizes the importance of the distinction between the "available" and the "real" referent "God," reminiscent of Kant's phenomena-noumena dichotomy. The available God is not real, and the real God is not available to us, he argues.[5] Our understanding of God is a humanly constructed notion. We notice the increasing use of the term "mystery," an ever greater emphasis on theology as imaginative

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[3]*Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960.

[4](New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968).

[5]See "God as Symbol," in *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 82-115.

construction, as well as an increasing agnosticism. Because we cannot experience God directly, we cannot claim to know God as an independent reality.

Not until 1975, however, when he wrote his *Essay on Theological Method*, did Kaufman begin the process of seriously re-defining the theological task. His passion for this project is grounded in the conviction that there is confusion about what theology really is and that traditional approaches to theology, especially revelation, are no longer adequate, his own, as portrayed in his *Systematic Theology*, included.[6] He is convinced that neo-orthodoxy, as represented by theologians as divergent as Barth, Tillich and H.R. Niebuhr, is no longer acceptable because its church-based theology ignores the fact that the church is itself a socially and culturally defined institution.

> It ignores the fact, for example, that the entire vocabulary of the church—including such central terms as God, man, church, reconciliation, revelation, prayer, faith—consists of ordinary words from the everyday language of people. Everyone who speaks English (or German or Russian or Italian, in the corresponding cases) knows and understands these words and uses them in appropriate situations. Their meaning, thus, is tied to the life of the culture as a whole and can be grasped only in connection with that broad cultural base and experience: it is by no means the private property of the church or of those who are members of the church (3).

For Kaufman, theology must be seen as a public discourse since it is, after all, about life itself and not about the life of merely some people or about one aspect of life. "Theological reconstruction is not undertaken simply to satisfy some mere intellectual or speculative impulse; it is a demand of the life of faith itself. In every generation theologians have undertaken to construct and reconstruct the ideas of the world and of God in such a way as to make them intelligible in their time, thus providing the necessary presupposition for life in faith" (61).

What is the base within the public arena from which to construct theology? The possibilities by now are somewhat restricted. We should remember that Kaufman rejects the

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[6]He comments on his approach in *Systematic Theology*, saying, "I now regard the methodological foundations of theology set forth there, especially as expressed in a somewhat simplistic view of 'revelation,' as seriously misleading." See his *Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975), 19n10.

traditional options: pre-Kantian natural theology and post-Kantian experience based theology.[7] Kaufman's proposal is that since theology can no longer be rooted in the church, it must be lodged in "ordinary language(s) of Western culture at large. . . . The central business of theology is reflection on the peculiar weightiness and meaning involved in the term 'God' with a view to determining as explicitly, precisely and coherently as possible just what that meaning is and what its implications are" (16).[8]

Kaufman accepts the Kantian proposal that the concepts of the self, God and world are imaginative constructs, "created in the mind for certain intra-mental functions and thus, of a different logical order than the concepts and images we have of the objects of experience" (25). God is not an object of experience, nor is God "out there" in any meaningful sense. The notion of God-as-objective-reality, in some sense experienceable or even in any meaningful sense over against us, must, for the sake of intellectual honesty, be abandoned, says Kaufman. Hence, theology is ill-conceived as a metaphysical enterprise, at least in the traditional understanding of metaphysics,[9] and should instead be conceived as a linguistic construction project which humans

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[7]It is interesting to note that in regard to inadequate theological methods there is much agreement between Kaufman and George Lindbeck. [See Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984)]. Lindbeck calls the orthodox approach "cognitive-propositional" and the post-Kantian approach "experiential-expressive." His own proposal, the "cultural-linguistic" approach, has some affinities with Kaufman's model but also some distinct and important differences. Both agree that theology is not about making ontological truth claims nor about reflections on religious experiences. Yet Lindbeck would reject the notion that the language of faith is that of Western culture. For his proposal it is necessary to see the language of faith largely over against dominant cultural language. After all, only by learning faith language thoroughly is it possible to come to know the concepts essential to the Christian faith. Lindbeck accepts the Christian tradition as normative in a way that Kaufman does not. Kaufman would argue that Lindbeck's approach is sectarian and gives privileged status to only part of society and indeed to only part of human history. This, Kaufman would argue, the Christian commitment to all of humanity and to intellectual honesty prohibits.

[8]It is important to note that Kaufman admits that his project is in the end not as anti-parochial as his critique of neo-orthodoxy suggests. It turns out that he has merely shifted contexts from the church to Western culture at large as the base from which to define the meanings of theological language. See *Essay*, 19n7.

[9]It should be noted that Kaufman, in an essay "Metaphysics and Theology" (1978) suggests a close relationship between the two but only after having re-defined metaphysics as also a wholly constructive enterprise. Traditional metaphysicians would not agree to this use of the term. See *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 238-262.

qua humans engage in in order to make their world a meaningful place to live in.

Such a construction project is, Kaufman argues, not without its logical order. This order "begins in experience and returns to experience, but in between are major constructive acts of the imagination, the generation of notions of the world and of God" (46). There are three steps in this order of construction. The first entails the construction of the concept of the world, the second the construction of the concept of God (guided by the following four considerations: relation to the concept of world, the human significance, logical consistency and aesthetic considerations (57)) and the third returns again to experience and the world in light of the constructed God concept. Moreover, the concept of God serves two important and interrelated functions: as relativizer of our experiences and the world, and as "a humanized and humanizing quality which the concept of the world lacks" (54).

Kaufman identifies several important consequences of this approach for theology. Three of them are the following: First, it dislodges theology from the canonized texts of specific religious traditions; "We no longer can settle theological issues by appeal to the authority of scripture or tradition" (57). Second, it makes the church irrelevant for theology; "Whether the church as an institution lives or dies, theology has an important cultural role to play—so long as people continue to use and understand the word 'God'" (17). And third, it repudiates the traditional view of truth as correspondence; "With this conception, then, criteria of correspondence cannot be applied: only criteria of coherence and pragmatic usefulness to human life are relevant and applicable" (75).

In 1981 Kaufman published a collection of essays entitled *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God.* Here he further explicates the roles of culture, language and the norms of relativization and humanization in theology as construction. He points out that we are not just animals with a past, but through the inevitable workings of human consciousness we reflect and evaluate life with a view to giving it meaning. Moreover this is as natural and as essential to us as the air we breathe.

Kaufman again insists that the conceptual scheme in terms of which we give orientation to life is not based on our perceptions nor is it in any way related to an independent reality. This mode of thinking has its origin within us; within our imaginings. Hence it is a mistake to regard God as a particular being with characteristics. "Instead of the subject (God) being a *given* to which the various predicate adjectives are then assigned, here the

descriptive terms themselves are the building blocks which the imagination uses in putting together its conception" (29).

In 1985 Kaufman published the Ferguson Lectures given at Manchester University in a booklet entitled *Theology for a Nuclear Age*. Here he demonstrates how an applied constructive theology responds to a contemporary social problem.[10] He begins with the suggestion that the analysis of the nuclear threat by apocalyptic fundamentalism is dangerous precisely because it does not employ a constructive approach to theology. The religious right can argue, apparently without self-contradiction, that a nuclear holocaust could be the expression of God's sovereignty over history. Moreover, human efforts to prevent such a catastrophe would be seen as opposing God's rule. This kind of theo-logic, says Kaufman, is evidence that a new approach to theology is needed. The traditional conception of God as one who engages in violent destruction is so totally "out of sync" with our new situation that we must abandon it in favor of a new conception. "The notion of God's sovereignty seems to have become fundamentally irrelevant to understanding what we should do in the new situation in which we find ourselves" (ix).

Hence, we must start afresh, replacing traditional talk about God with new categories which are meaningful for contemporary human beings. In doing this we are doing nothing more than has always been done; by failing to do this consciously we will ensure the irrelevance and gradual death of theology.

> The stark fact of total human responsibility for the earthly future of humanity, which a potential nuclear catastrophe symbolizes, calls into question all this traditional talk—held together so tightly and meaningfully in the symbol of the divine sovereignty—of God's power and purposes and love as the proper and only adequate ground for hope in our desperate situation. This fact demands that we ask much more seriously than many have yet done whether it is not necessary to reconsider some of the most fundamental axioms of western religious symbolism and faith (8-9).

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[10]I agree with Sheila Greeve Davaney when she argues that the work of *Theology for a Nuclear Age* is the "embodiment of Kaufman's constructivist project, not its repudiation." In "Directions in Historicism: Language, Experience, and Pragmatic Adjudication," *Zygon* 26 (June 1991): 209. The latter has been argued by some reviewers, to wit, Ronald Cole-Turner, "Review of *Theology for a Nuclear Age*," *Cumberland Seminarian*, 24 (Spring 1986): 30-31, and David A. Pailin, "Review of *Theology for a Nuclear Age*," *Perkins Journal*, 39/3: 5-36.

"All this traditional talk" about God which must be rejected includes "our refuge and strength," "our father in heaven," "lord of hosts," "king of kings," as well as more abstract jargon like "holiness and glory, righteousness and wrath, omnipotence and omniscience, infinitude and absoluteness" (33). So how does Kaufman define "God?" "By 'God', then, we mean the ultimate point of reference for all understanding of anything; by 'God' we mean the ultimate object of devotion for life" (25). And the guiding criteria for the construction of God are "relativization" and "humanization."

In 1993 Kaufman's latest book, *In Face of Mystery*, was published.[11] Here he proposes to work out "a full-scale reconception of Christian theology" (ix). The task he sets for himself is essentially a refinement of his work thus far and he does this especially in reference to the three categories of theology which he holds to be basic: humanity, world and God.

The book does not develop a new approach to theology but it does broaden its understanding somewhat. For example, we get a refinement of the meaning of the term "mystery". He tells us that "'Mystery' has a fundamentally intellectual character, whatever its experiential overtones" (60). Mystery therefore protects us from deceit and gullibility. Life is ultimately a mystery and therefore the only approach proper to theology, which is to illuminate this mystery, is one grounded in intellectual imagination.

Furthermore, he emphasizes that theology is best understood as "conversation." Kaufman is not introducing a new notion here but just a slight variation of an earlier way of speaking. It is not "the exegesis of sacred texts or the arcane debates of learned intellectuals, nor is it meditation or reflection in the privacy of one's solitude (however important may be the contributions of each of these), but rather free-flowing, open, and unfettered conversation" (66). Where does this conversation take place? Ironically among the new "learned intellectuals."

> It may be that the only institutional context available in modern society for such open and unfettered theological conversation is to be found in our great liberal universities. . . . Perhaps it is time to think of academic theology (in contrast with, for example, denominational or

[11] *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

> liberation theologies) of having the special vocation of providing a setting within which the whole range of theological (as well as appropriate "nontheological") voices could be heard, a setting within which each would be respectfully listened to and could be engaged in serious conversation with voices from the other (often conflicting) perspectives (67-8).

For Kaufman the traditional role of the church has been replaced with the liberal academy where "educated persons" are now its model members instead of "faithful believers." The close affinity between church and theology in the past has led to an "out-and-out Christian chauvinism" justifying diabolical events such as the Crusades and the Holocaust. He believes that the academy can protect theology from just this kind of fate.

He continues to repudiate the role of tradition in theological inquiry. Tradition is the problem and imaginative construction guided by the "conversation" within the academy is the solution.

> For those of us for whom a global consciousness is beginning to take hold, *all particular and thus parochial religious and cultural and philosophical traditions are now outmoded and superseded to the extent that they cannot give an adequate or illuminating interpretation of our new historical situation, these new sociocultural facts about human life.* For such traditions no longer provide an interpretation of our actual human existence, of our situation in the world as we today are aware of it (italics his, 133).

Kaufman goes on to suggest that we should, however, not forget that we are products of past traditions. Without tradition we would be nothing. But the manner in which we must relate to this tradition is via imaginative reconstruction.

> So we must move forward, becoming as aware as possible of the traditions which have shaped us and of their limitations and strengths, adopting from them whatever we can and adapting them to the new circumstances in which we find ourselves, as we seek to reshape them—imaginatively to reconstruct them—so they can better provide orientation for the new world into which we are moving. And of course we must be open to learn whatever we can from those other traditions, those other religious and secular ways of ordering

> and understanding human life in the world, with which we increasingly come into contact (133).

The tradition in which we find ourselves plays no normative role, however; it only plays an identity formation role. It is the place from which we do our constructing; it does not tell us how to construct. Imaginative construction appears to be an innate capacity essential to the human mind. And humanization seems to be an innate capacity capable of assessing the value of our experiences. Hence, it is no different for us than it has been for people of past traditions or as it will be for people of the future. The human imagination has made it possible for human beings to have culture, and indeed theology, throughout history and it will continue to do so. "My proposal differs only in its suggestion that we today are in a position to make this human religious constructivity more self-conscious, self-critical, and deliberate than has been possible previously; and that it would be, therefore, both obstructionist and irresponsible not to do so" (234).

Kaufman believes passionately that the only hope for theology today, and for that matter the world, lies with the human ability literally to re-create its own environment—both the natural environment as well as the environment of our minds which supplies us with meaning. For him the greatest threat is the resistance to change and the attempt to perpetuate arcane traditional patterns of living and thinking.

II

It is hard to know how to respond to Kaufman's proposal. There is much that is compelling about his claim that theology involves the human imagination. In this respect, it needs to be noted, however, that theology is not all that different from other disciplines of human knowledge—both other humanities as well as the sciences, at least if we listen to some contemporary philosophers of science.[12] In any event, our response to Kaufman should not question whether creative imagination is fundamental to the theological enterprise. Here Kaufman is quite right. The

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[12]It is important to note that much of the language of conceptual schemes, imaginations and paradigms comes from philosophers of science like Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) and Imre Lakatos, *Mathematics, Science and Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). This language is not new and unique to theology, as Kaufman sometimes appears to assume.

questions that must be asked, however, relate to whether Kaufman has adequately described the functioning of the imagination within the task of theological construction and whether humanization and relativization are in fact functionally capable of being criteria for the guidance of this project in the manner in which Kaufman suggests. By raising these questions we will have, by implication, asked whether Kaufman is justified in rejecting all that the Christian tradition has held dear: the Bible, the church, traditional conceptions of God, divine agency, truth as correspondence, etc. In other words, we will examine very briefly whether the acknowledgment of the creative role of human imaginings commit us to this kind of radical debunking of tradition, or whether it may not be possible and preferable to link tradition and imagination in a manner which Kaufman believes is untenable.

It appears to me, if I have understood him correctly, that for Kaufman the enemy is not postmodernism but primarily premodernism. This is so because he believes that the dominant method of theology today is still stuck in the premodern era with such notions as church, authority and tradition. It is not surprising therefore that his solutions carry with them the ring of modernity and not postmodernity, although on occasion he borrows from the latter. What I mean by this is that his faith in the process of rational (imaginative) reconstruction of theological language as an intellectual practice which alone can save theology from extinction, as well as his proposal that the humanizing and relativizing experiences should be guides for such a project, are thoroughly reminiscent of the manner in which the Enlightenment liberals speak of reason and experience. If I am right, then it is perhaps appropriate to view Kaufman as a new St. Thomas. Thomas has the distinction in Western intellectual history of having christianized the thought of a pagan philosopher, Aristotle; Kaufman, more than any other contemporary liberal, has attempted to christianize the thought of the Enlightenment.

As an Enlightenment liberal, then, it should perhaps also not be surprising, albeit a bit harder to accept, that the two primary postmodern criticisms of modernity—namely that a non-tradition-based reason (imagination) is a myth, and that modernity has failed to recognize the dangerous political alliance between knowledge and power—have not really been heeded by

Kaufman.[13] What postmoderns ask of Kaufman is that he more thoroughly historicize imagination (rationality) and humanization, and here I would agree. Yet at this point Kaufman seems to resist. Rationality and humanization appear to be disembodied ahistorical qualities unfettered by the socio-historical exigencies of life. What postmoderns laud Kaufman for having learned from them is the thorough historicization (and thus pluralistic character) of truth.[14] This, given the other components of his approach, I believe, makes it virtually impossible for his relativism to stop short of nihilism.[15]

It is easy to agree with Kaufman that Christian theology has in the past been chauvinistic and imperialistic. It is not hard to see that zealous believers have at times used theological concepts like Christ, God, salvation, and others, in harmful ways. What is more difficult to understand is how Kaufman's response is really a solution to such misuse. What value is there in suggesting to people, who abuse concepts which they take to be universal, that these concepts are but products of their minds or of a bad tradition's imagination? What would prevent such people from imposing their constructed concepts of theology on others? That is, the problem here is not primarily the nature of theology but the distorted will of human beings. To ask it differently, is the right-wing apocalypticist, who preaches that God will destroy the earth unless people repent of their sins, really more dangerous than the liberal constructionist who advocates that we must take matters into our own "creative" hands because there is no other "real" power to rely on in this universe? It seems to me that what is needed in our day is not a Kaufmanian constructionist model of theology but a model which advocates developing a tradition of meaning in terms of which it would be meaningful and hence convincing to say that the particular concepts in question simply

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[13]These criticisms have been made of Kaufman specifically and of liberalism generally by several scholars, and especially feminist. Two examples are Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Options in Post-Modern Theology," 200, and Susan B. Thistlethwaite, "God and Her Survival in a Nuclear Age," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4 (Spring 1988): 73-88.

[14]Kaufman identifies himself with scholars like Richard Rorty, Jürgen Habermas, Heinrich Peukert and others and says, "My suggestion that (religious) truth should be understood to be specifically dialogical (and thus pluralistic) in character is in harmony, I think, with this growing interest in conversation and 'communicative action'" (*Mystery*, 467n6).

[15]A similar point is made by David L. Schindler in "Metaphysics and the Problem of Historicism in Contemporary Theology," in Paul L. Williams, ed., *Historicism and Faith: Proceedings of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars*, (Scranton: Northwest Books, 1980), 87-101.

do not admit of harmful manipulative use and hence, using them in this manner is wrong. This also requires imaginative construction, but in a way quite different from Kaufman. That is to say, I find it difficult to accept that tradition is the problem which must be overcome, rather I believe it can be the solution in terms of which humane life and God intended conduct can become possible.

According to Kaufman, the problems underlying much oppression in our society stem from what he calls a "property-model of truth" (*Mystery*, 65), that is, a view which considers truth a commodity owned and therefore controlled by one party who can dispense it to others at his/her own discretion. Again examples come readily to mind. Yet Kaufman tends to suggest by his critique that it is therefore dangerous to consider our own beliefs as being true. Truth language itself appears to be the problem for Kaufman. But it is not clear to me what then we should take our beliefs to be. Not all positions "taken to be true" need be imperialistic. There is nothing chauvinistic about holding one's interpretive scheme to be true while being open to new insights gained from encounters with other competing schemes (indeed expecting that there will be some encounters which will show our own claims to be false or in need of serious revision). Yet this notion requires the very presupposition of truth which Kaufman seems skeptical of.

It is even more difficult to see how Kaufman expects to overcome the problems of imperialism with his suggestion of the "great liberal universities" being the new locus for theological "conversation." Is there an institution which in the past has been more intimidating, elitist and imperialistic, at least to some aspects of our society, than the university? Does this institution not connote all the same obstacles (as well as some additional ones) which Kaufman has accused the church and the Christian tradition of: authoritarianism, exclusivism, tradition, hierarchy, misuse of power, etc.? What is there about the university, other than conversation among diverse disciplines, that can give us hope that these problems can be overcome? In shifting from church to university he is not being less parochial or less elitist, but more so. The language of the university has never been the language of ordinary people, despite the fact that it has attempted to be the custodian of "ordinary language of Western culture at large" (*Essay*, 16); the church has always done a better job in this regard than the university. What is astounding is that Kaufman has disregarded the plea by the liberation theologians (from many sectors of the Christian church, Black, women, Latin American,

Native, etc.) who have again and again made the "elitist argument" against Western theology grounded in the Western imagination. Granted they have also been critical of the existing church, but the solution can hardly be to simply substitute one institution for another.

Kaufman claims that imaginative construction is not something new but that we today are in a position to do it more self-consciously and self-critically. But this raises an interesting question. If it has always been done then either it has been done satisfactorily and hence Kaufman has no new method to advocate—which does not appear to be the case—or it has not been done satisfactorily and hence there are criteria which he has discovered which now are brought to bear on how construction must be done right. But where do these criteria come from? The answer implicit in Kaufman's writings seems to be "from the structure of the human mind itself." The language of Kaufman suggests that if only we employ our powers of imagination (serendipitous creativity) and give attention to the current situation and think relativization and humanization, it will all happen. But it is extremely hard to see how there can be empirical warrant for this claim. It is hard to see Kaufman's basis for hope. What possible basis for agreement does this model hold out? Does it not maximize diversity (and indeed relativism) to the greatest possible extent? And are these not the real threats in today's fragmented society?

And then there are the practical questions. Is it really conceivable, for example, that the Christian theological imagination can flourish without a distinct community relying on authoritative texts, foundational stories and distinctive symbols? Is it even possible to image God apart from the context of such texts, stories and symbols? Can creativity within the bonds of reason alone really be unitive? Certainly not if there is no universally accessible principle of reason. Is it not the case that such an abstract notion of creativity contains the seeds for the very impossibility of the continuity demanded by meaningful existence?

The attractiveness of Kaufman's position lies with his apparent honesty; what is less appealing is his disregard for the Christian tradition and his assumption that theological construction can take place based on the criteria of imaginative construction alone. My view is that if Kaufman were slightly more honest, he may recognize that his own measuring sticks are themselves conceived from within a particular tradition—that is, a tradition shared by extremely few of the world's Christians. Are we really to believe

that our commitment to intellectual honesty and thorough scholarship bind us to the abandonment of tradition and truth as correspondence and keep us from considering the Bible and church as authoritative? Alasdair MacIntyre argues that it does not.

At this stage in my thinking I remain convinced that we must affirm the possibility of truth and adjudication among rival rationalities. Rejecting this possibility seems to me to be the mistake of the postmoderns, Kaufman included. Although I can only do so in a cursory fashion here, I will suggest that Alasdair MacIntyre's recent work in philosophical ethics, in which he embraces a tradition-based rationality and simultaneously a tradition-transcendent truth, can help us begin to carve out an alternative to both the perspectivism of the postmoderns and the liberalism of Kaufman.

III

Alasdair MacIntyre is a British/American philosopher currently teaching at Notre Dame University and working at the problems of methodology in social ethics. In his recent work he laments that in modern society we have lost the ability to make ethical decisions. He suggests that this is so because we no longer share a common tradition of moral inquiry in terms of which moral disputes can be settled. We live in a fragmented society which has resulted from the failure of the Enlightenment project to deliver on its promise to successfully ground all on a universal principle of reason.[16] MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment/liberal objective to ground all in human rationality was unsuccessful not by accident or sloppiness, which could then be corrected by brighter and more careful intellectuals, but that its failure was inevitable and necessary. This project could not possibly have succeeded because it was grounded in a view of the world and of human nature that did not and could not sustain its own credibility for long.

In order to understand MacIntyre's critique of liberalism and his counter proposal we must first examine what he means by tradition. He uses the term to designate a mode of inquiry, as the title of one of his many books suggests: *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition*.[17] The first

[16]See especially *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 37-78.

[17](Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

method of inquiry—Encyclopaedia—was championed by Enlightenment thinkers suggesting that pure human rationality governs our understanding of things and that rationality and truth are universal. Hence, encyclopedic knowledge is both possible and desirable; possible because all human beings *qua* human beings could potentially acquire it, and desirable because it would finally purge philosophy from its traditional crutch—church authority. The second "mode of inquiry," represented by Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals*, (1887), argues that the encyclopedists claim to universality and objectivity was a grand deception and in fact a disguised "will to power." For Nietzsche the moderns were no improvement over the premoderns since both espoused a life-denying ascetic ideal; the former in their enslavement to notions like sin and duty, and the latter in their insistence on academic rationality. Nietzsche's aphoristic alternative "takes there to be a multiplicity of perspectives within each of which truth-from-a-point-of-view may be asserted, but no truth-as-such, an empty notion, about *the* world, an equally empty notion. There are no rules of rationality as such to be appealed to, there are rather strategies of insights and strategies of subversion" (*Three Rival Versions*, 42).

MacIntyre is no less critical of the Enlightenment than Nietzsche, yet at the same time he spares Nietzsche no contempt for his equally ill-fated "mode of inquiry."[18] The problem with both Encyclopedists and Genealogists, contends MacIntyre, is that neither properly understands social reality and that neither knows what it means to be human. Our humanity is not defined by us in our rational reflections on our essences as the Encyclopedists suggest, nor is it rooted in our self-discovery or self-definition processes as the Genealogists would have it. Human beings are essentially storied people; we can understand ourselves only as we place ourselves within the very stories that have shaped us—stories that "aspire to truth" (*After Virtue*, 216). "Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions and in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources" (ibid).

[18]It needs to be cautioned that MacIntyre considers Nietzsche's model not to be a mode of inquiry at all but the absence of one. "Nietzsche did not advance a new theory against older theories; he proposed an abandonment of theory" (*Three Rival Versions*, 49).

MacIntyre's view of human nature is that we are largely what we have inherited. That is, we are born as "bearers of a tradition" (ibid, 221). And there is no overcoming this fact of the association between our humanness and the traditions which we inherit. There is no place outside of tradition where we can stand, from which we can understand ourselves and the world "objectively." Precisely because of this there can be no rationality which transcends tradition. This means that the encyclopedists and the genealogists are simply wrong in their basic assumptions. Our mode of inquiry cannot be other than tradition. Traditions can be good or bad, just or corrupt. Most are some of each and most are in conflict sorting out their move towards their espoused *telos*.

MacIntyre gives us a succinct definition of tradition: "A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations" (ibid, 222).

One might think that MacIntyre's tirade against the Enlightenment, as well as against Nietzsche, commits him to an historical relativism/perspectivism from which he cannot escape. This is a common misreading of MacIntyre. His whole project is an attempt to show that this is not the case. How this mode of inquiry can avoid such consequences is not easily explained, however. He speaks to this in many of his writings but at no place more poignantly than in a chapter entitled "The Rationality of Traditions" in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*.[19]

In this book MacIntyre presents a narrative history of three dominant traditions of moral inquiry: Aristotle, Augustine and Hume, and he identifies the need for writing a fourth, that of liberalism. Each tradition gives its own account of the virtues, of selfhood and of metaphysical cosmologies (349).

> Each tradition can at each stage of its development provide rational justification for its central theses in its own terms, employing the concepts and standards by which it defines itself, but there is no set of independent standards of rational justification by appeal to which the issues between contending traditions can be decided (351).

[19](Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

Each tradition has its own authoritative texts, persons, beliefs, institutions and practices. And each living tradition is in constant process of change as new questions arise within it for which the known past does not have adequate answers, or as once useful and meaningful practices and rituals cease being so, or worse still, now themselves become harmful or dysfunctional and hence threaten the maintenance of the tradition. But the criteria of adequacy are not those which arise from a socially disembodied Cartesian or Kantian constructionist mind; they are rather rooted in practical reason as individuals relate to each other and to social and natural objects and sort out within the continuity of the tradition how such matters can be reformulated or refined (355).

The most important ground of all for a developing tradition is the extent to which it embodies truth. MacIntyre does not abandon the traditional correspondence theory of truth, albeit he rejects many of its historical and contemporary formulations. Descartes and Kant, given their rationalist assumptions, have thoroughly distorted the concept of truth which in turn undermines the credibility of the liberalism grounded on their ideas. For them and the nineteenth century philosophers, the mind is the ultimate authority. But, as MacIntyre points out, really it is the mind itself that stands in constant need of correction (357). Given that this is so, mind itself cannot be the final appeal in the search for truth.

Already in 1977 MacIntyre attempted to state the somewhat complicated conception of truth in the language of correspondence. In response to Thomas Kuhn's work in the philosophy of science, MacIntyre says:

> . . . [Kuhn] denies any notion of truth to natural science other than that truth which attaches to solutions to puzzles and to concrete predictions. In particular he wants to deny that a scientific theory can embody a true ontology, that it can provide a true representative of what is "really there". . . . This is very odd; because science has certainly shown us decisively that some existence-claims are false just because the entities in question are *not* really there--whatever *any* theory may say. Epicurean atomism is not true, there are no humors, nothing with negative weight exists; phlogiston is one with the witches and the dragons. But other existence-claims have survived exceptionally well through a succession of particular theoretical positions: molecules, cells, electrons. Of course our beliefs about molecules, cells and electrons are by no means what they once were. But Kuhn would be put

into a very curious position if he adduced this as a ground for denying that some existence-claims still have excellent warrant and others do not.[20]

MacIntyre is firmly committed to the necessity of the notion of truth in order for any mode of inquiry to be successful. This is why he is so vehement in his critique of the Nietzscheans. But the sense in which MacIntyre understands truth as correspondence, especially given his tradition-based mode of inquiry, is a difficult one to grasp. It seems so easily to come undone in one of two directions. If correspondence between mind and reality is the ground of truth then it tends to be pointless to advocate a tradition-based inquiry since one then apparently acknowledges a ready access to reality—one which presumably would be common to all traditions. On the other hand, if there is no privileged access to reality independent of tradition-based inquiries, one then seems stuck with a view of truth which precisely can not be identified as correspondence. It is the assumption of the exhaustiveness of these alternatives that has befuddled a good number of interpreters of MacIntyre.

MacIntyre clarifies his position on this matter in a 1991 interview with *Cogito*[21]. He is asked to respond to the charge of relativism which is often brought against him and he says that this represents a misunderstanding of both him and relativism. Relativists often go further than they need to go in their efforts to claim no more than honest scholarship permits. They are right in maintaining that our modes of knowing and even our standards of reasoning are culturally determined. But then they go two stages further and in neither of which MacIntyre accompanies them. He says:

> The first stage is that of supposing that somehow or other these conclusions about the multiplicity of concrete modes of reasoning and of modes of justification for evaluative and normative conclusions provide grounds for putting in question and altering one's views of the justification of one's own reasoning and conclusions. The second is that of supposing that the same considerations should lead to a rejection of the claims of any substantive conception of truth (71).

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[20]Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," *Monist* 60 (1977), 469.

[21]*Cogito*, 5:2 (1991), 67-73.

It is in so far as relativists go these two stages further than warranted that they become untenable. MacIntyre's position must be properly understood as going part way with the relativist but not all the way.

In a recent *Festschrift*[22] in his honor, MacIntyre takes the opportunity to respond to his critics on commensurability and translatability regarding rival rationalities and the matter of truth. He makes some interesting comments. He points out that although adherents of particular conceptual schemes must be conscious that there may well be standpoints "more comprehensive than their own" (297) this does not commit them to a relativism as defined by the last two stages suggested above. Moreover, how one views relativism is related to whether one is a spectator or a participant. He says:

> Notice that what generates this type of progress, in which the frustration of all attempts to resolve disputed key issues in the debates between rival traditions of enquiry always remains a possibility, but through which such frustrations are from time to time overcome or circumvented, is the shared presupposition of the contending enquirers in respect of *truth*. It is this shared presupposition that makes relativism a position tenable only by spectators of such enquiry, viewing it, whether in imagination or in actuality, from some external vantage point, but not at all by participants. It is the continuing possibility of such frustration that makes relativism a permanent temptation for such spectators (297).

In summary, MacIntyre's approach suggests that the tradition-based mode of inquiry requires that there is no standpoint outside of tradition from which to launch an inquiry. Secondly, this does not preclude analysis, evaluation and even truth. However, these are all also tradition-based. This means that canonical texts are a given, that the continuity of society (community) is indispensable and that a tradition-based rationality/experience evaluates the quality of life not by the disinterested imagination of mind but by acknowledging that one's own mind is already firmly shaped by an inherited imagination and evaluating whether the truth one claims to see

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[22] *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, edited by John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

from within this tradition is truth indeed. The latter must include, albeit in a special way, the thinking and experiences of those within the community as well as those outside.

IV

What remains is an attempt to encapsulate, in very broad strokes, the implications of the Kaufman/MacIntyre encounter of methods. As I have indicated, I believe that Kaufman presents us with major challenges. Human imagination is crucial for the possibility of human knowledge generally and certainly also for theological knowledge. This we cannot dispute. Moreover, Kaufman is right in cautioning us to beware of the dangers of overconcluding. We must add that the dangers of underconcluding are also real. As MacIntyre has shown, we can go too far in the direction of relativism.

I have argued that the chief questions that arise with Kaufman's proposal focus on his attempts to exempt rationality and the humanization criterion from their proper tradition-based determination. This, I contend along with MacIntyre, is not humanly possible even if it might be desirable. How we imagine is determined by the tradition in which we do so. We can imagine from this tradition or that tradition but we cannot just imagine. It is like a language; we cannot just speak, we must speak either English, German, French, etc. Hence, just as language learning is most important for language speaking, so tradition learning is most important for imagining. In some respects this makes the problem epistemologically worse than Kaufman takes it to be. If we must acknowledge that reason (imagination) and humanization are no less tradition based than are all the other tradition-based authorities, we seem to be more rather than less thoroughly committed to an inescapable relativism. But in another respect this acknowledgment helps us. It is a great step forward to realize that Enlightenment liberalism does not have the solutions to our problems; rather, it is the problem. Once we acknowledge this we can begin to focus in a more promising anti-foundational direction for new hope. And this is the focus of MacIntyre's work.

What this essentially means for us as Christians is that our tradition is not one we can get out of in the manner Kaufman suggests. We are stuck with it but we can and must evaluate it nevertheless. Once we acknowledge that there is no neutral standing place from which to adjudicate then it becomes possible to live within our accepted tradition with much greater ease,

albeit with no less concern for truth and justice. Kaufman is right in insisting that we must work at overcoming inhuman practices and imaginations undergirding such practices. But to assume that we can do this by declaring the tradition itself obsolete, outmoded and in need of being superseded by something that amalgamates all points of view, may be possible for the angels but it is not possible for socio-historical human beings.

My contention therefore is that theology is neither wholly imaginative construction nor is it pure description. It entails imaginative construction which is both produced by and mollified by a tradition at work interpreting a living text for a real community in search of truth and justice. That is, imagination is the engine of an argument over time in which a living tradition gets verified. It is not even possible to conceive that either tradition or imagination could exist in its separated form—this is perhaps the most dangerous of all presumptions. For without imagination tradition would be dead and without tradition imagination would be contentless. Both are necessary in order for us to have knowledge. And given that they require each other, human knowledge is by its very nature incomplete and tentative. Yet we come to know what we know as tentative because on occasion we come to know it to be false. And coming to know it to be false presupposes truth as a guide to our imaginative constructions.

In order to clarify the inter-relationship of the various elements of the model I am proposing I present the following diagram:

Several interpretive comments are in order. It should be clear from the diagram that theology on this model is a tradition-based inquiry. This is not the place to spell out all that is entailed in such a model but a few things must be said. It should be noted that reason, imagination and experience are all tradition dependent, operating on the text which the tradition has pronounced authoritative in a way that other texts are not. Moreover, this is a living tradition producing a particular community which is simultaneously the epistemological test of the truth of that tradition. That is to say, although truth (or telos) is outside of tradition and hence never fully embodied within it, the aim of the community is precisely the embodiment of this truth. In other words, this tradition is no mere abstract argument for truth; it is the quest for its concrete embodied expression.

It should also be noticed that a tradition-based inquiry does not only deliberate on itself; it also relates to (is in conversation with) other traditions, experiences and other than theological disciplines of knowledge. Nevertheless these other elements do not have the same authoritative function within the tradition as do those within the box, in the diagram. At the same time they cannot simply be ignored. Competing rival traditions can only be tested, however, in reference to what a given tradition holds to be true. This is so because there is no outside-of-tradition standpoint from which to do so. I will now briefly comment on each of these elements.

First, the Bible as canon. A tradition-based mode of inquiry, as MacIntyre has made clear, emphasizes that no tradition exists without its canonical texts. For Christian theology, this is the Bible. The most crucial question, however, is how this text functions within Christian theology when seen as a tradition-based inquiry. Kaufman is right in suggesting that sacred scripture cannot function simply as the authoritative response to every conceivable problem or as a prescription for patterns of behavior to be repeated in perpetuity. If the Bible is the living word of God—as the tradition understands it—then it must itself be alive. To ensure that this is the case the Bible must be interpreted, that is, made meaningful to the lives of men, women and children in today's world.

Perhaps the most important part of interpreting the biblical canon in this way is learning to become "fluent" in the understanding of its culture. The Bible is not best understood as a set of true propositions; it is rather a narrative tradition or set of traditions which we can come to know and sort out in order to be able to "participate" in it.

Second, the body/process of interpretation. Interpretation is not done based upon disembodied, ahistorical principles of reason. It is done in relation to the reason which is generated by the tradition itself. Learning to understand the tradition of the Bible as well as the history of its interpretation means learning to understand how to think, imagine and even how to experience within that tradition. The Enlightenment is wrong in suggesting that these are innate human qualities. Each tradition trains its adherents differently in this respect. Moreover, the task of interpretation is not complete once we have understood the traditions of the text. Part of understanding the text entails its creative function within the community of faith which practices the very life that is being interpreted. "Sense making" is not only determined in reference to what has made sense in the past (although it does that); it is also tested in relation to experiences and ways of thinking in the lives of people today.

Moreover, interpreters must themselves be participants, because a way of life is not properly understood apart from its actual historical/sociological expression. Sense-making is not only an intellectual matter, it is also a sociological matter. Theology as tradition-based inquiry prohibits full understanding from the standpoint of spectators, for as such one sees the matter of faith in a limited and distorted way. For spectators the only tests of truth are tests of coherence, pragmatics, intellectual warrant, etc. Theological knowledge is inseparable from embodiment. The Mennonite theologian Hans Denck knew this long ago, when he said that "We cannot know Christ unless we follow him daily in life." The Enlightenment epistemological distinction between the mind and the body is not reliable. How the mind thinks must eventually be tested by how the body lives.

It must be said here that within our own (Mennonite) tradition we have not taken the task of interpretation as seriously as we should have. The temptation for us has been to attempt to go directly from the Bible to the community of faith. We have spent much time learning the traditions of the Bible, that is, cultivating the skills of biblical interpretation, but very little time in the important part of the interpretive process which entails embodying that understanding in the life of the community of faith. Kaufman has been helpful in reminding us of the importance of the role of interpretation as a lived theology in our day.

In the diagram I refer to the "body" as well as the "process" of interpretation. When interpretation works within the tradition-based inquiry model the result is that a secondary set of

authoritative texts emerges. These texts serve as a guide, or as a model for how to understand the canonical text. Here the Jewish tradition, with its Talmud, for example, is really far ahead of the Christian tradition. A tradition-based theological inquiry requires that such paradigmatic authoritative interpretations function to help keep the tradition from straying into diversification from within which identity becomes meaningless.

Third, the community of faith. A central act of the community of faith is worship. Worship involves all aspects of our model, creative imagination, experience, reason, interpretation, Bible reading and the process of opening ourselves up to the living God. If a Christian theology cannot explain the importance of worship, it cannot be Christian theology since worship is an important test of the authenticity of the tradition. However, simultaneously it is also central in shaping the tradition. An important second act of the community of faith is conscious reflection and sorting out of truth from untruth. The Christian tradition must always work at overcoming acts and structures of injustice and unpeace. The language of faith itself must be tested in this regard. Here, again, Kaufman has done us a service in emphasizing the close connection between imaginative construction and the concern for justice. Yet our contention is that unless this is part of the tradition-based inquiry, both the act of construction and the maintenance of structures of justice are impossible.

It is important to note the implications of a tradition-based theological inquiry for theologians. This model makes theologians servants of the church, not in the sense that they merely say what the church wants to hear, but in the sense that they "interpret" life under God. At the same time, this model requires that the task of theological reflection and action, that is, practical rationality, is the central task of the church. Without it the church loses the power of the very language which sustains it.

Fourth, truth (telos). It is also important to recognize that a tradition-based theological inquiry presupposes the possibility of truth. Moreover, we must believe that the tradition which we embrace in large measure embodies the truth, and in so far as it does not, it could. The presupposition of truth is the one thing that can get a tradition to change. We need to be quick to point out that this does not commit us to the chauvinistic view that we alone are right and everyone else is wrong. What it means is that we *believe* that we are right and we take all persons who embrace competing traditions to *believe* the same about their traditions. But the argument between the two traditions will not be settled by

appeal to a cleverly constructed proof, which is necessarily grounded in one of the traditions which the other rejects. It will only be resolved by each tradition living and thinking faithfully and in this manner allowing the inbreaking of truth itself to resolve the matter.

Fifth, reason, imagination and experience. Much has been said already about the function of these three components. A tradition-based theological inquiry is no less rational than any other rational discipline. However, it is true that its concept of rationality employs imagination and experience in a way that is slightly different from the norm. It is a practical rationality. I see this as consistent with the emphasis of many feminists and other liberationists who have criticized Western theology for being too cerebral in its approach. The approach I am advocating assumes that sense making is holistic. It assumes that the best argument is a tradition of justice, peace and truth. This is, after all, what a tradition-based theological inquiry attempts to facilitate.

V

The crisis of contemporary theology, I believe, is in the final analysis not a crisis of imagination. That is, it is not at bottom only an epistemological crisis. Today's crisis of Christian faith is even more so one of embodiment. After all, what it is that we can know has to do with what we see, and what we can see has to do with the place from which we look. When we look from within the shroud of contemporary Western liberal rationality, we will have a hard time seeing the God of the Christian tradition. We will instead see a tribal god, one of our own creation, albeit one very different from any preceding tribe. And a god whom we create cannot save us. Such a god must be saved by us and by our intellectual strategies. Ironically the outcome of a tribal god is the very one the whole constructive imaginative project was intended to repudiate.

On the other hand, when our imagination is located within the rich Christian tradition we are not enslaved to the repetitions of archaic images and dehumanizing practices. Human rationalities and human experiences change over time because we are living pulsating creative beings. Theological constructions must change because the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Mary and Paul, the God of Jesus Christ, is a living being grounding and inhabiting life itself. And this God who lives within the lives of human beings today has always lived. Unless our theological imaginations can "explain" the "continuity of God-language"

convincingly in light of the biblical text and the tradition which has given us our understanding of God to begin with, they cannot meaningfully be said to be Christian theology. But perhaps even more important, the "explanation" ought to be sought not only in the imaginative works of our best intellectuals but also in the lives of the ones who have remained traditional enough to be able to open themselves to the transforming power of God who has spoken through texts the church considers authoritative, through the one whom the church calls Christ and to the community which gathers regularly in worship.

One final comment. My disagreement with Kaufman's approach to theology represented in this essay should not be misunderstood. Kaufman has taught me much. His writings were very instrumental in pulling me away from a study of pure philosophy to a serious study of theology in my graduate student days. I have always been very impressed with his concern for integrating history and theology in his early writings and the depths to which he probes the relationship between language and theology. More recently I have become concerned about his anti-realism and his extreme Kantian constructionism. At bottom what this debate is about is how to relate history and nature which has befuddled scholars for centuries and seems far from being resolved today. And so the search for glimpses of the solution continues. The issues here are enormously difficult. My musings here should be seen as an attempt to make but a small offering to this larger debate.

Chapter 5

The Seamless Robe of Human Experience: An Essay on (Mennonite) Theological Method

Daniel Liechty

I

Christian theology traditionally applied itself to the task of clarifying human knowledge of God. God was conceived as distinct from the world, as transcendent and apart from the world. Theological prolegomena centered on the epistemological issue of how finite human beings can have knowledge of a transcendent and infinite Being, God. Theology looked to three main sources for explication of the content of human knowledge of God: verbal revelation in Scripture; God's reflection in reason and the natural order; and the perceived progress in human development and political history. Broad theological traditions emerged by the ranking and relative valuation of these three sources of divine revelation. Schools within these theological traditions emerged from the resulting content readings of these sources of revelation.

Theology has experienced a paradigm shift in the past generation, based on the recognition that theology is a human process which is pursued for human purposes.[1] There is a recognition, based on broad interdisciplinary understanding of the nature of human language and experience, that all human discourse, including the discourse of theology, is embedded in a self-referential hermeneutical circle. Human discourse is commentary on other human discourse. Fundamental to this new paradigm is an understanding of the central role of language in human life. The development of language is seen as the mechanism by which human experience is made possible. Language is the essential characteristic of being human. But language itself is a human artifact, thoroughly historical in

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[1]Cf. the essays collected in the two volumes, Hans Küng and David Tracy, eds., *Theologie—Wohin? Auf dem Weg zu einem neuen Paradigma* (Zürich-Köln-Gütersloh: Benzinger Verlag/Gütersloher Verlaghaus Gerd Mohn, 1984) and *Das Neue Paradigma von Theologie: Strukturen und Dimensionen* (Zürich-Köln-Gütersloh: Benzinger Verlag/Gütersloher Verlaghaus Gerd Mohn, 1986).

character.[2] This new paradigm grounds theology in human history and human experience of the world. The categories of theology are not seen as simply "given" and set in stone for all time. These categories are shaped, criticized, and interpreted by human beings based on their living social, cultural, and communal experience. Theology, attempting to articulate schemes of symbolic meaning in the face of the ultimate mystery of human existence, is a human activity carried out for human purposes.

This theology welcomes use of the tools of secular analysis and ideological criticism into the discipline of theology proper. Theologiáns using this paradigm experience a new and self-critical way of looking at the world. These methods have been resisted in some circles as foreign to the discipline. Yet there is not one area of theology remaining, from scriptural study to pastoral care, where the results of this ideological criticism can be facilely ignored. This has brought theology out of the ghettos of intellectual purity and into the modern world. There theology must compete as one voice among others in the sometimes confusing and cacophonous chorus of perspectival pluralism.

Although this new theology initially focused on economic oppression in the context of Third World development, its methodology and liberationist intent were soon expanded to include interpretations of racial relations, feminism, and sexual politics. In each of these extensions the focus has been on the source data of human development and political history. There has been a developing consensus that human thought and action is fundamentally "historicist" in character—that all human truth, including rational and scientific truth, is shaped and developed within the context of human history and must therefore be evaluated by reference to its historical context.[3] Therefore, theology is conceived as a disciplined, imaginative construct.[4]

More recently, in what might signal a transformative move in the new theology, attention has been given once again to the

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[2]Cf. Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[3]Gordon Kaufman was one of the first to understand the implications of historicism and to apply these insights to theological formulation. Cf. his *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960); *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968); *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

[4]Gordon Kaufman has best outlined the idea of theology as imaginative construction in *An Essay On Theological Method* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975) and *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981).

natural order, to the place of human beings within the ecological system and the environment.[5] It is recognized that in this narrative of human history, oppression extends not just to other human beings but to other species and to the natural order itself. The contribution of theology to the problem of how we can change the world now must be seen in a planetary ecological context. For without a habitable environment, no human community will survive. We have come to see that our lives and our striving for a meaningful existence take place within a web of interrelations, in which all parts affect and are affected by the other. The seamless robe of Jesus (John 19:23f), which if separated into parts destroys irrevocably the integrity of the garment, has become a fitting symbol for understanding the nature of our existence on this planet.

In conservative Protestant orthodoxy, the truth of the Christian religion is conveyed in propositional statements. This theology has been especially influential in American Mennonite theology in this century. The social situation of modernity, the consciousness of the historicity of human thought, has brought a change in the way we understand propositional knowledge. The self-assured assertion of propositional knowledge rested on a tradition of discourse which remained largely unaware of the ways in which its own social setting determines the content of the axioms of truth within the conversation.

We are coming to a broad and interdisciplinary consensus that what is accepted and agreed upon as knowledge or truth is shaped and affected by the point of view of the speakers. Modernity places us in a predicament in which there are many competing and conflicting religious points of view, each rational and reasonable on its own terms, without any compelling external authority to mediate between them. This creates an entirely new puzzle for the religious seeker living in conditions of modernity. The truth claims of no religious tradition, neither one's own nor any other, can be taken as self-evidently and universally true. Each religious tradition comes to be seen as a self-referential hermeneutical circle. Its truth claims make sense to its adherents

[5]Signal works are Gordon Kaufman's *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985) and most recently *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

from the inside, but may be far from logically compelling to those outside the circle.[6]

The reflective thinker in conditions of modernity comes to realize that the truth claims of a religious tradition are socially constructed. Religious knowledge as disembodied divine truth which is apprehended and applied by historical communities in particular situations has been the traditional paradigm for communicating "God's Laws" and explaining why these seem to differ in terms of time and place. The newer paradigm, which is becoming increasingly persuasive to the reflective thinker in conditions of modernity, holds that religious knowledge is entirely embodied in the human community from which it originates and gives expression to various aspects of that community's experience of the world. In this paradigm, continuity within a religious tradition is evidence of communal memory, while novelty and change demonstrate that the social experience of the world does not remain static. This consciousness of the social construction of our everyday world arose in conditions of modernity. There the social experience of the world changes so rapidly and communal memory is so short that even ordinary people with ordinary minds cannot help but catch a glimpse of this process in motion.

Once this consciousness of reality as a social construction has taken hold, all aspects of knowledge and truth, but particularly

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[6]For some years I have been working from a frame of reference which I have characterized as "postliberal." To my knowledge, this term was first used by Macquarrie to designate the thinking of the brothers Baillie and Niebuhr. These theologians offered to the English-speaking audience criticism of 19th century liberal theology somewhat similar to what Barth, Brunner, and Cullman had offered to Continental theology. Cf. John Macquarrie, *20th Century Religious Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1963). I used the term somewhat differently, to mean a theology which accepts the traditional liberal theological method of beginning with human reason and experience (i.e. a theology "from below") but which rejects very explicitly the assumptions of that theology concerning the perfectibility of human nature and the inevitability of progress in human history. Cf. Daniel Liechty, *Theology in Postliberal Perspective* (Philadelphia/London: Trinity Press International/SCM Press, 1990). The same term has been applied by others to refer especially to the approach of, *inter alia*, George Lindbeck, in his *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984) and this has caused inquiry concerning the similarities and dissimilarities between these various forms of postliberalism. Here I think that Gordon Kaufman's distinction between the confessional and cultural functions of theology is very instructive. I find Lindbeck's approach to be useful when, as in this essay on a specifically Mennonite theology, the focus is on the confessional. However, I find it wanting when, as I hoped it was in my book cited above, the focus is on the cultural function of theology.

religious knowledge and truth, must be approached as human phenomena. Seeking to evaluate religious knowledge and truth, the paramount question in the encounter with the truth claims of a particular tradition is not whether, in some disembodied sense, these claims are or are not true. The concern is rather one of understanding how these truth claims emerged in the life of the community and the ways in which these truth claims function in the ongoing experience of that community.

Yet a truly objective analysis of these factors can only be relatively attained. Every attempt at analysis assumes the point of view of the person making the analysis. The less critically aware one is of his or her past and present influences, of his or her "background noise," the more danger there is of this creating distortions in the process of understanding the truth claims of the various religious traditions.

Theology is now understood as grounded in the lived experience of the communities of faith within which it originates. It is the historical memory of the community, in conversation with the ongoing experience of the community, which forms the basic content of theology. In this essay I will begin by outlining the functional understanding of God in this theological paradigm. This helps to place Mennonite theology within the wider context of Christian theology. I will then attempt to outline some essential elements of the Mennonite historical memory. Finally, I will briefly outline a proposal for a specifically Mennonite theological method. It is the purpose of this essay to suggest some basic implications this paradigm has for Mennonite theological constructions, theological constructions grounded in the historical memory of the Mennonite tradition, in conversation with the ongoing experience of particular Mennonite communities of faith.

II

When we approach the meaning of God from a functional or phenomenological point of view, we see that religious communities use this symbol to express the ultimate values of their communal memory and experience. Human existence, both personal and communal, is by definition limited by finitude, by mortality. Because of this final limitation, we are unable to exercise total control in any situation. Therefore, we are never perfectly able to implement our values in the realm of history, no matter how dearly we hold these values nor how sincerely is our desire for perfection. The results of our actions will always have an underside, a "shadow" side. While we might wish to disavow

the shadow side as unintended, it is an inextricable accompaniment to all human action on this planet.

The symbol of God has many functions in the religious community. But a very central function of this symbol is to allow the community to conceptualize and meditate upon what it might be to implement our values in a way which transcends human limitations. This in turn aids us in recognizing areas in which the implementation of our values are being limited by internal and external factors; it allows us to identify these factors and to devise strategies to transcend these limitations.

Let us look at the value of love. Love has many different meanings which arise from how love is experienced in specific situations. The love between siblings is not the same as the love between marriage partners. The love between parent and child is not the same as love among people in the community. Love among people within the community is not the same as the love one has for humanity as a whole. Therefore, any attempt to put love into practice, into action, will reflect the differences in our experience of love. One kind of love must be offset by other kinds of love. This results in an underside of unintended, negative consequences. This is why "perfect love" cannot be shown in any real situation (except by God, and we are not God). For the demands of perfect love in any real situation in terms of time, attention, resources and commitment will inevitably ingress on the ability to express the same kind of love in other spheres of action. That which is committed to one area is not available for commitment in another area. This is perhaps one reason why the apostle Paul and others suggested that for those who would make a total commitment to action expressing love for the community—total commitment to the "Kingdom of God"—it is best not to marry and to have a family. The commitment of time, attention and resources demanded by the expression of love for the community are not available for the family. Neglect of family might be the shadow side, one of the unintended consequences, of total commitment to the community.

God is our symbol for the perfection of values which transcends the limitations of finitude. In the contemplation of the symbol of God, we are able to arrive at a better understanding of what "perfect love" would look like in a given situation. Whereas our commitments must always seek a balance on the basis of either/or, our contemplation of perfection in the symbol of God allows us to imagine commitments on the basis of both/and totality.

This contemplation of perfection is vital for the religious community. It is our main spur toward a deepening spiritual understanding of love as applied in specific situations, allowing us to identify those factors which limit expressions of love in specific situations, particularly where we have placed higher value on material things, on ideology and on structure than we have on the welfare of human beings. We are then able to arrive at a balance which equates more closely the perfection which we seek. God's perfect love is an ideal-typical model which calls us forward toward concrete expressions of love which embody God's perfect love and bring that more perfect love into the world in which we now live.

The symbol of God, the symbol of perfection, will always stand in tension with actual practice within the religious community, since actual practice can never exhaustively embody the perfect love of God. The human tendency is to try to relax that tension. Our calling is to work toward relaxing this tension through more complete ethical approximations of the love of God, even though this will never be totally achieved. There are, however, two temptations to relax this tension, both of which are idolatrous. They are in one sense opposite, yet two sides of the same coin.

The first of these temptations is to ascribe to God moral and ethical attributes which we know in our hearts to be less than perfection. The clearest examples of this occur when the symbol of God is co-opted for partisan political interests. A tribal god of national partisanship, for example, may fill people with a sense of total righteousness as they march off to kill and maim the "enemy." There is no tension between God's perfection and human imperfection when the symbol of God is presented as having the same characteristics of partisanship as the human community. People on both sides of the conflict simply move against each other in the full confidence that "God is on our side." This applies no less to disagreements within the religious community itself. This move is idolatrous because it in effect treats our human will, desire and understanding as Godself. We must ask ourselves whose interests are being served by such a presentation of God. If there is one thing which we must humbly accept in confrontation with the ideal-typical symbol of God, it is that we are not God. If we assume otherwise, it is idolatry, plain and simple.

The second of these temptations is to use the ideal-typical symbol of the perfection of God as a weapon with which to flog

ourselves mercilessly for the fact that we are not perfect.[7] An ideal-typical symbol is there to help us become better people. When it becomes an instrument of blanket condemnation and instilling of guilt, it is not able to perform that vital function. It becomes an instrument of discouragement and an excuse for inaction and moral stagnation. Again, we must ask ourselves whose interests are being served by keeping people in a constant state of discouragement and guilt. This move is idolatrous because it in effect expels God from the arena of history. It is a pious form of atheism.

Theologians help people of the religious community to understand the symbol of God better, to aid the community in discerning when the ideal-typical function of this symbol is being undermined in specific situations by the temptations of idolatry, to systematize communal values into their symbol of God, and to communicate that message both in- and outside of the religious community. The work of theologians, therefore, is primarily constructive rather than descriptive. By assisting the religious community to maintain the proper ideal-typical function of its symbol of God, theologians working within the context of modernity do not simply describe the world, but help to change it.[8]

III

Mennonite theology arises from the context of Mennonite communities of faith. The many varieties of Mennonite

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[7]This tendency toward judgmental legalism has been the fundamental temptation in Anabaptist/Mennonite history, dating back at least to Menno Simons' concern, in reaction to Lowland Anabaptist excesses, to create a church "without a spot or wrinkle." I think that this is unavoidable as a tendency because Anabaptist theology is in essence a theology of ethics—it is a rationalization for why we feel called to certain definite ethical commitments. This approach to theology has its own integrity. But its integrity is only increased by remaining aware of the kind of idolatry to which it can give rise when the experiential/spiritual dimension is ignored.

[8]The development and articulation of Mennonite religious thought cannot be limited to the work of academically trained theologians alone. The ideal of the "priesthood of all believers" assumes, in effect, that each person contributes directly to the task of theology. While this might be somewhat idealistic, at minimum those who must be seen as contributing very directly to theology in the Mennonite context would have to include preachers, worship leaders, ministers of music, teachers, psychotherapists, writers of essays and novels. The role of the academically trained theologian is very valuable, but it can hardly be privileged in the way it has been in other traditions.

communities will give rise to many varieties of Mennonite faith, and hence to many varieties of Mennonite theology. A Mennonite theology is grounded in a creative tension between historical memory and the ongoing experience of the particular Mennonite community in which the Mennonite theologian participates. As part of a Mennonite community of faith, the theologian will attempt to give voice to the way in which the community interacts with historical memory and the ways in which current experiences of people within that community interpret and expand upon that historical memory.

What constitutes the basic elements of the Mennonite historical memory? What is it specifically that makes a Mennonite theology Mennonite? What are the basic values which have emerged from the Mennonite tradition to which we give such importance that they have come to be expressed as the nature of Godself? When we hear Jesus calling us to "be perfect, even as God is perfect," what do we implicitly understand as the content of this perfection?

I suggest that there are three basic elements, each of which are thoroughly grounded in both the Anabaptist beginnings and the subsequent history of the Mennonite communities of faith which have shaped that tradition. I am not claiming that any theology which does not hold these elements in its center is not "Christian" or is not edifying or beneficial. I am only suggesting that it would not have a specifically Mennonite character.

The first of these elements is *pacifism*. Absolutely integral to the Mennonite historical memory is the experience of a people who have understood the Christian life in terms of an ethic of nonviolence. The applications of this ethic of nonviolence in specific circumstances have been matters of discussion. It may be understood minimally as a refusal to participate in organized armed conflict. It may be maximally understood as an entire approach to life in this world which does not prepare for violent encounters, seeks reconciliation rather than punishment or revenge when conflict does occur, and seeks to live peacefully with all species and the natural order. It is not, in other words, a tool of partisan politics. It is neither liberal, conservative, nor radical, and it can be adhered to by both the local butcher and the vegetarian. But however it is understood in specific circumstances, commitment to the values associated with nonviolence is a touchstone of a Mennonite theology, deeply rooted in the historical memory of the faith community. A theology which does not promote such values of nonviolence fails to support adequately the creative tension between historical

memory and ongoing experience in which a Mennonite theology is grounded.

The second of these elements is *mutual aid*. This central value of Mennonite historical tradition admonishes us to maintain an attitude toward property in which we place our worldly goods in the service of others. Again, there are minimal and maximal interpretations of this teaching. In some communities it has led to a thoroughgoing economic communalism. Other communities have been happy to participate in formally institutionalized structures of economic redistribution. Each of these and the many possible intermediary approaches have integrity within the Mennonite tradition. But a theology which does not promote such an understanding of worldly goods which leads to a strong sense of responsibility for those in need, which does not lead to mutual sharing and mutual aid, fails to support adequately the creative tension between historical memory and ongoing experience in which a Mennonite theology is grounded.

The third element is *the communal nature of spirituality*. This element is a bit more vague than the first two, yet no less important. Integral to Mennonite historical memory is a distinct teaching concerning the corporate nature of the Christian life. That Christian commitment is also an individual commitment is not disputed. But very individualistic presentations of the Christian life are foreign to Mennonite historical memory. In Mennonite communities, Christ incarnate is experienced through the gathered assembly of believers. It is within the community that the process of discipleship, of disciplining life, takes place. It is a recognition of the absolute interdependency of human beings. A theology which primarily stresses the individual commitment of the Christian life, downplaying or ignoring the corporate nature of that commitment fails to support adequately the creative tension between historical memory and ongoing experience in which a Mennonite theology is grounded.

IV

A Mennonite theology cannot be spun *ex nihilo* from the head of the theologian. It has to be the product of a Mennonite community and express the religious values and beliefs of a Mennonite community. When we read past formulations of Mennonite theology with the consciousness of the historical character of human thought, it is clear that this has always been the character of our theology. It can only strengthen the character

of Mennonite theology for theologians to become more explicitly aware of the communal/historical character of their work.

As the theologian strives to give voice to his or her community, a specific methodology emerges. The theologian, participating in that community, will listen intently to those doctrines and values which are explicitly affirmed, to those which are explicitly disaffirmed, and to those which are simply ignored and left in silence. The theologian will bring his or her specialized training into discussion with what the members of the community are finding to be true in their lives. The theologian will then make experimental and tentative attempts at formulations and theological statements. While these formulations will certainly have the character of a personal confession, since the theologian participates in that community, it is expected that a job well done will be more than a personal confession: it should give voice to the religious thinking of the community.

As the theologian tests these tentative formulations within the community, whether through writing, preaching, or group discussion, attention will be given to various categories of the community's reaction. Most will fall into one of three categories:

1) statements to which those of the community would say, "Yes! That's exactly what I have been thinking! You've said it right!"

2) statements to which those of the community would say, "Well, I've never thought of it that way. I see that it is consistent and follows from this other thing which does express my views, but I'll have to think about that some more."

3) statements to which those of the community would say, "No, that's really off the wall."

In the first case, the theologian knows that he or she has carried out the interpretive function of the Mennonite theologian well. In the second case, the theologian knows that he or she has performed the instructive function of the Mennonite theologian well. And in the third case, the theologian knows that personal confession has intruded so deeply into the theological work that it has little value beyond that of a personal confession. The relative success of a work of Mennonite theology is judged by how much of the reaction of the community fits into categories 1 and 2, with as little as possible fitting into category 3.

This theological method is based on a recognition that theology is a human enterprise which proceeds with human goals in mind, those of giving a sense of order and purpose, a sense of meaning, to the life and worship of the religious community of faith. In this way Mennonite theology will assist the internalization of its focal

values while at the same time allowing the community to remain open to reconstruction of that which it has inherited through its faith tradition. It is neither a retreat into simple fideistic confessionalism, nor is it simply setting the community afloat without moorings on the sea of relativism.

Recognition of the historicity of human thought has as its correlate the understanding of God as an ideal-typical symbol within the religious community, shaped by the historical memory and the ongoing experience of that community. God as an ideal-typical symbol must be on the side of life rather than against life.[9] Recognizing that no particular presentation of God can ever capture exhaustively an ideal-typical symbol, the style of theologians working within the context of modernity will be supportive, interactive, and appreciative of differences.[10] Close attention will be paid to the ethical consequences of various presentations of God, including especially the shadow side, the underside, the unintended negative consequences of communal beliefs. Within the pluralistic context, a religious community which keeps critical self-awareness at the center of its theology maintains its opportunity to act on its highest values in the arena of human history. This living by its values, demonstrating the vitality and integrity of its vision of life in the arena of action, is also the strongest possible verification of its truth in the current environment of pluralism.

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[9]In its respect for historical memory, theology definitely has a "conservative" responsibility to employ. On the whole, however, theology must have a liberating intent. A theology which owes allegiance to an ideal-typical view of God can never be satisfied with the status quo entirely.

[10]I find particularly attractive for envisioning the possibilities of Mennonite theologians the image of the patch-work quilt employed by Sallie McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda," in Wall/Heim, eds. *How My Mind Has Changed* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1981), 135-143.

Theology, Culture, and Science

Chapter 6

Toward a Theology of Culture: A Dialogue with Gordon Kaufman

Duane Friesen

Tension and ambiguity describe the dynamics of a Christian theology of culture. Our language and conceptual thought frequently mask these ambiguities. To name is often to divide and distinguish, to think in categories of either/or—spirit or matter, good or evil, truth or falsehood, God or history, church or world, life or death, order or chaos. The most profound truth about our lives is that seemingly polar opposites belong together in creative tension.

The creative tension in a Christian theology of culture arises from the twofold emphasis in Christian life and thought on transcendence and immanence. Christians worship a transcendent God "beyond" culture. At the same time, the church is called to express loyalty to God by living faithfully within culture. Christians confess loyalty to Jesus Christ, a person whose life and teachings are integrally linked with first-century Jewish culture, yet Christians believe Jesus symbolizes the way, the truth and the life for all cultures. Christian existence is life on the edge, at the boundaries. We are in the world to the core—earthly creatures who are part of the web of life, who belong to families, cities, and countries, who share the language, the mores and customs of the culture into which we are born. Yet our lives are shaped by stories and metaphors not shared by the wider culture. We are in tension with the mores and customs of our culture; we belong to a people, a social group or identifiable society (the church) whose values are not identical with the culture around us.

I. The Purpose of a Christian Theology of Culture

A theology of culture is an effort to develop appropriate metaphors for understanding God's relationship to the cosmos and our lives within that cosmos for our time and context. These metaphors provide the critical leverage for interpreting our cultural setting.[1] They provide an orientation for enabling us to

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[1]A religious cultural system is a vision of the "whole." But since in religious faith the "whole" or "totality" of reality is always "beyond" finite human experience and knowledge, human beings never grasp or possess the whole, but can only point to what that reality is *like*. The symbols link or bridge between the

decide what it means to live responsibly in a world of human tragedy arising from violence and injustice, a world threatened by ecological disaster. A specifically Christian theology of culture is oriented around Jesus Christ as the central symbol or root metaphor for the interpretation of reality and the norm for defining the nature of human responsibility in the world.

A Christian theology of culture, then, should accomplish four goals. (A) It should be practical or functional. It should both help us to know (discern) how we should act responsibly, and also empower us to act creatively in the world. It is not enough just to know what to do, but we also must have the will, the imagination, and the means to act. Empowerment, it seems to me, requires that we pay attention to the "affective" level of human action and also to the role of institutions that can mobilize human beings to action. (B) Secondly, a theology of culture should enable us adequately to interpret the world and the place of humans within that world. That requires theologians to be in conversation with broader intellectual and ethical issues being considered in the broader culture beyond the boundaries of the church. (C) Thirdly, a theology of culture should aim for coherence. If we accept Gordon Kaufman's view that God is the "ultimate point of reference" for all of life, then theology should attempt to give a coherent interpretation of the whole of reality as we know it. This third goal, of course, is always provisional and never complete, since the whole to which we seek to give coherence cannot be experienced or known in itself. The "whole" is something we are always in the process of constructing to give coherence to our lives. (D) And fourth, a Christian theology of culture will clearly reflect how its central symbol, Jesus Christ, provides the point of orientation for guiding human thought and action within culture.

Gordon Kaufman has made one of the most important contributions, among contemporary theologians, in addressing the question of how we orient ourselves as Christians and act responsibly in culture, particularly in view of the threat of nuclear war and ecological disaster. In responding to these very serious practical questions, Kaufman's distinctive contribution to

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ultimate, the whole, and their own finite reality.

The basis then of any statement of religious faith is *metaphor*. According to Sallie McFague in her book, *Metaphorical Theology*, "a metaphor is an assertion or assignment of similarity and difference between two thoughts in permanent tension with one another which redescribes reality in an open-ended way but has structural as well as affective power." Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 42.

Christian theological reflection arises from a second, different question he has pressed with intellectual vigor and courage: do our inherited traditions and beliefs about God, Christ, sin and salvation help us to interpret who we are and empower us to act with insight and conviction, or are, perhaps, these very traditions and beliefs part of the problem? Is it possible that the very views of God learned from the Bible and church tradition have contributed to ecological disaster, violence of humans against each other, and injustice that results in wide gaps between rich and poor? These are questions which Kaufman has been addressing for the last decade, beginning with *Theology for a Nuclear Age*, and addressed systematically and comprehensively in *In Face of Mystery*.[2]

As a Christian social ethicist and fellow Mennonite, I share Kaufman's concern about the human and environmental predicament in which we find ourselves. As a Christian, I believe that one of the major purposes of the church is to seek the shalom (well-being) of the city (culture) where the church dwells. (Jer. 29:7) In order genuinely and adequately to address the well-being of our culture, we need as a church to be conversant with the intellectual and ethical issues of our cultural context. I identify with the breadth of Kaufman's theological reflection. Kaufman is the most recent and most vivid spokesperson of a long line of Mennonite theologians (represented by the first president of Bethel College, C.H. Wedel, and by his father, E.G. Kaufman) in the Russian Mennonite tradition actively engaged with culture. He does not limit his theological reflections primarily to the Bible and church tradition, but engages the intellectual and ethical issues of the wider culture. Though Christian theological reflection is primarily oriented by the meaning of the Christ event, the subject of theology includes reflection on the theological significance of human inquiry beyond the church (i.e. within universities and colleges, people's movements for change, etc.) in the wider culture.

Kaufman does not restrict theological reflection to hermeneutical issues: how to interpret, make sense of, or apply the ethical insights of the Bible and church tradition to the modern world. Rather than beginning with the theological content of the tradition and then seeking to make sense of that tradition in the light of modernity ("faith seeking

[2]*Theology for a Nuclear Age*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985); *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

understanding"), Kaufman calls for an imaginative construction of theology. Instead of asking us to take a Kierkegaardian "leap of faith" based upon an appeal to revelation, Kaufman rather proposes a series of small steps of faith as he makes his case for a conception of God that can both make sense of a 20th century view of the world and orient humans in how to live and address the central issues of our time. Kaufman is passionate in his commitment to develop a theology that can address the great ethical issues of our time. At the same time, he is modest in his proposals, acknowledging that other views are as plausible to reason as the steps of faith he argues for. Kaufman reminds us frequently that we are "in the face of mystery." He offers his theological proposal for consideration as part of an ongoing conversation that calls for a variety of contributions from differing points of views as we face the perplexing questions that baffle the human mind.

II. Toward an Understanding of Culture

In developing his project, Kaufman first of all constructs a concept of the human, and then a concept of the world, to provide the context for his imaginative construction of a concept of God. Each of these concepts are then qualified by a fourth category, Christ. Each of these movements represents a small step of faith, which altogether amount to devotion to a God of both mystery and a God moving the universe in a trajectory toward human and humane purposes.

I agree with Kaufman's ordering of theological reflection. We appropriately begin by asking the questions: who are we human beings, what is culture, and how is that humanly-created culture linked to the web of life which makes human existence and culture possible? We begin with an interpretation of culture in order to get a proper orientation concerning what it means to think theologically. My claim is that the Bible, and Jesus Christ, the central symbol of the church, are cultural phenomena, not realities separate from culture. One of the major confusions in thinking about a theology of culture is when we begin with the false dichotomy of Christ *and* culture, as if Christ were not an integral component of culture. My position is that the various views of Jesus Christ, which have oriented the lives of Christians, are themselves cultural visions. The issue is not, then, how to understand the relationship of Christ and culture, but how to understand a cultural vision with Christ as its center in relationship to other cultural options.

Culture is the humanly created world of meaning developed in the context of interaction with the matrices of biological existence. Culture consists of the human, historical constructions of meaning reflected in our language, ritual, institutions, artifacts, technology, and our patterns of living. Clifford Geertz defines culture as follows:

> It denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men (sic) communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.[3]

What makes culture possible is human language, our capacity to interpret the meaning of human life through symbolic systems. Culture is that collection of symbolic systems or forms through which human beings express the meaning and significance of their lives in a way quite unlike other animal species, yet we are humans, and like all other animals, interact with and are dependent upon a physical and biological universe that can sustain life.

Geertz contrasts the blink of the eye and a wink. Both can be understood physiologically. A blink is a complex physical reaction that can be understood in all its complexity from a physiological point of view. But a similar physical action may become a "wink" that has symbolic meaning and significance as part of a complex psycho-social interaction between two lovers. We live by both blinks and winks. Our eyes would not continue to function in a physiological sense if we could not blink. But neither could we survive as human beings without "winks," i.e. means of communicating with other human beings our intentions and interests.[4]

I have spent some time in the last several years reflecting on my own cultural heritage. I grew up as a Mennonite in Southeastern Idaho with the notion that Christians worship a transcendent God "beyond" culture. I assumed our beliefs, rituals, institutions and way of life were distinct from culture. We were "in" the world of culture, but in a more important sense were not

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[3]Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in Donald Cutler, ed., *The Religious Situation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 641.

[4]Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). See chapter 1, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," especially pp. 6f.

"of" the world, meaning there was something *not* cultural about our existence. This view of the issues was reinforced by my reading in graduate school of H.R. Niebuhr's classic, *Christ and Culture*, where he defines the issue as the relationship of Christ *and* culture, and then defines the Mennonite position as against culture. However, the more I struggled with Niebuhr's way of defining the problem, the less sense his starting point made to me. The Mennonite position I grew up with was not against culture (as if Mennonitism were some entity separate from culture). Rather, it was a cultural vision that was both in harmony and in tension with other cultural perspectives. In the church community of Aberdeen, Idaho, we attempted to live faithfully according to a cultural vision that was different from those around us, and at the same time we were very much like those around us culturally (in language, customs, standard of living, use of technology, attendance in the public schools, participation in politics). Christian existence was for us life on the edge, at the boundaries, not between this world and another world, but between cultural alternatives. We lived in tension with the mores and customs of one culture, because we belonged to a people whose lives were oriented by different cultural symbols, rituals, institutions, and values. Thus, to be "in" the world but not "of" the world meant to belong to *two* cultural worlds. We shared elements of both cultures, but by belonging to a second cultural world, we also lived in creative tension with the cultural world of many of our neighbors.

When we define culture, we must be careful to avoid a serious misunderstanding. A theology of culture, though it is an interpretation of human meaning systems, includes how we integrate into our thinking both our views of and actions toward the physical and biological structure of the universe.[5] Human scientific understanding of the physical universe is an integral part of our cultural system. As we work toward a discerning stance, then, we must be sensitive to how we integrate an understanding of human historical action within the context of our knowledge of the physical universe. We must take much

[5]See Rosemary Radford Ruether's book, *Gaia and God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992) which is an excellently done account of how our cultural myths and symbol systems shaped both our views as well as our actions toward the cosmos. Ruether models how this kind of theological and cultural analysis must be done in the context of a deep and thorough knowledge of ecology and the sciences, so that we can develop a theology and practice in which our myths and symbols legitimate practices that sustain a responsible relationship to the earth.

more seriously than we have that human history appears at a latter stage in the cosmic process of evolution. Therefore, when we speak about culture, we must broaden the scope of our conversation beyond the dimension of human history alone, to include the entirety of creation.

In Part II of *In Face of Mystery* ("Constructing a Concept of the Human"), Kaufman develops views of human culture and its connection to the biological web of life. He then goes on in Part III to construct a concept of the world, the context for human action. As Kaufman points out, we do not experience or know the world in its totality as finite creatures. Thus, our view of the world, like our concept of the human and God is also an imaginative construct. This does not mean that we have no "objective data" about the world which we work with. However, what we take this all to mean is our imaginative construction. Kaufman chooses to view the world as a cosmic evolutionary-historical process (instead of an eternal structure of repeated patterns) which has its earliest foundation in the Bible. Within this evolutionary process human life emerges with the capacity of language, self-conscious reflective thought and purposive action. Kaufman argues against reductionism, i.e. the explanation of human behavior in terms of the material conditions out of which it emerges. Instead, human consciousness and purposive action is a new reality to the universe, made possible by biological processes, but now creating new processes in the universe that are humanly created and cannot be explained in terms of the material conditions out of which they emerge.

It is from this perspective that Kaufman develops two of his most distinctive contributions to our thinking about this biohistorical process: the concept of serendipitous creativity, and the idea of a cosmic trajectory, or directional movement in the historical process. By serendipitous creativity Kaufman means that in the course of history new events occur that produce consequences (both good and evil) that are quite surprising and were quite unpredictable at the time. For Kaufman, the universe is open to the future, not a predetermined structure. Secondly, Kaufman argues, as we look back at the cumulative evolutionary and historical development, we can see a series of "creative advances" of "directionality" in this cosmic process that, from our point of view as humans who emerge out of this process, is "good." Though we have no "objective" or scientific basis to view the process as more than a chance or random occurrence, we can choose to take a step of faith in seeing in this process a tendency

in the nature of things toward purposive development. As Kaufman puts it:

> The trajectory eventuating in the creation of human historical existence could be seen . . . as a significant expression of the serendipitous creativity manifest in the cosmos as a whole; and thus the appearance of human modes of being in the world would be properly regarded not as a metaphysical surd but rather as grounded in the ultimate nature of things, in the ultimate mystery.[6]

III. Kaufman's Concept of God

Having laid this groundwork by developing a concept of the human and the world, Kaufman is now ready deliberately to construct his concept of God. He says we come to a very important fork in the road. We could view God, as has been the case in the Bible and tradition, as analogous to a human purposive agent, a personal being who relates to the world like human beings do to each other. Or, a second model would be to imagine God, not as *a* being or agent separate from the universe, but in terms of the bio-historical process as a whole.

Kaufman proposes a non-dualistic reconstruction of theology in which God functions as the ultimate point of reference within a universe viewed holistically. Kaufman, therefore, does theology in the context of a "bio-historical" interpretation of human life. He believes that an adequate understanding of God must take into account the long process of biological evolution, the emergence of human life out of these biological conditions, and the growth of the capacity for historical/cultural development made possible by the emergence of human language and reflective self-consciousness.

Kaufman's choice for a process view of God, rather than God as a purposive agent separate from the world, entails two areas of critical analysis: the deconstruction of existing theological notions (including central biblical ideas) that do not adequately address the issues of our time or are destructive of life, and the reconstruction of concepts that are functional to sustain the web of life within which the human enterprise can also flourish.

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[6]Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 284.

Kaufman believes that the inherited biblical/theological picture of God's relationship to the world is problematic for two main reasons. He is critical of the traditional God/world dualism, which pictures God as a self-subsistent being who exists independent of the world. Such a notion is difficult to hold given our modern view of the universe as a self-contained, intradependent whole. What does it mean to hold to an "other" reality independent of the universe? How is such an idea intelligible?

Secondly, God as an agent independent of the universe has often been seen in very tyrannical and authoritarian ways. For example, the Apostle Paul refers to this God as one who exercises his power in arbitrary ways, "having mercy upon whoever he wills . . . and hardening the hearts of whomever he wills." (Romans 9:18) As a sovereign lord outside the universe, God, in this picture, has often been used to legitimate oppression and violence against other humans as well as destructive behavior toward the natural environment. It is true that the Bible itself reflects a profound tension between more humane and tyrannical views of God. Kaufman believes, however, that if God is "outside" and "beyond" the universe, then humans do not have adequate ways to "judge" or "critically assess" such a God. Kaufman says such a view of God is "very dangerous religiously. The dualistic world-picture to which it belongs and which it also authorizes portrays God as an absolutely authoritarian figure of utter omnipotence, a figure conceived to be beyond human reason and thus metaphysically protected from human critical assessment."[7] Kaufman does, however, attempt to preserve the two basic positive functions of this traditional picture of God. On the one hand, God's transcendence functions to challenge all human idols, the human tendency to create gods to suit our own parochial needs or interests. In a reconstruction of the concept of God, therefore, we need to be careful to preserve the "Godness" of God. Kaufman reminds us many times that in every imaginative construction of God we confront our finitude and mystery, the bafflement of mind about matters we simply are incapable of grasping.[8] We cannot, however, remain simply silent, confronted by mystery. On the other hand, the concept of God functions to provide criteria for human beings by which to orient themselves in the universe. The function of God is to humanize.

[7]Ibid., 272.
[8]Ibid., 60.

God functions as an object of human devotion and service to guide human life toward fulfillment.

IV. Christ as Paradigm

A specifically Christian theology turns to Christ as a paradigm for God and the human. The central Christian claim is that at a particular point in history, in connection with the man Jesus, we were given a paradigm for understanding both what God is and what the human is. However, Kaufman argues, we should not view God as simply in the man, Jesus, but we need to develop a wider Christology which includes Jesus and the events surrounding him. When Paul says, for example, that "God was in Christ reconciling the whole world to himself" (II Cor. 5:19), by "Christ" Paul does not mean simply the man, Jesus of Nazareth, but the whole relationship of the cosmos to God which was changed in and through the events surrounding Jesus Christ. Passages like this, Kaufman says:

> Signify the new order of relationships among humans and between humans and God which began to come into being in connection with Jesus and developed further after his death and resurrection . . . . To say God is incarnate in Christ, then, is not to say simply and directly that God is incarnate in Jesus; rather, God is incarnate in that larger, more complex human reality, surrounding and including and following upon the man Jesus; the new Christian community, with its spirit of love and freedom, of mutual sharing and forgiveness of one another. It is in this new order of interpersonal relationships that the incarnation of God is to be found.[9]

Christ, therefore, symbolizes the cosmic movement of God toward humanization. God is not simply in Jesus, but all that surrounding the Christ event point to the directionality of the entire cosmic process toward human and humane purposes. The man Jesus is important and essential in making more vivid and sharpening our vision of the movement of God throughout the cosmic process. But the movement toward humanization is not restricted to the man, Jesus, nor to the people who devote their lives to him. Wherever the spirit of love and freedom symbolized

[9]Ibid., 383.

by Christ is present within the cosmic process, there God is present.

If this principle is made defining and then generalized, "Christ" will include (potentially) all the great diversity of ways of being human which we find in our world, so long as they are healing and reconciling and humanizing (in the christic sense) and do not seek to be oppressive of or otherwise destructive to others.[10]

We observe in Kaufman's christology also the twofold dimension of his theological method. He deconstructs pictures of Christ that are destructive and violent, and constructs a picture of Christ that expresses the humanizing direction of the cosmic process. He "deconstructs" views of Christ which equate God with the man Jesus, and which view Jesus as exalted to the right hand of God, and to whom we must devote our lives as a condition for a relationship to God and for our salvation. Such a view turns the humanizing values symbolized by Christ into a triumphalist christology, a christology which laid the grounds for Christian exclusivism and imperialism. Kaufman argues that these traditional christological symbols do not derive from Jesus, but arise from the symbolical framework within which the story of Jesus was interpreted, a dualism which views God as a Sovereign Lord over the universe. In this traditional view, Christ is interpreted within a dualistic framework which depicts the universe as a political order ruled from on high by a divine King. In this picture of Christ, the humanizing values of love and freedom symbolized in the Jesus story are turned on their head and Christ is used to support chauvinistic and imperialistic causes.

We can observe a tension in Kaufman's christology that points to one of the critical issues raised by his theological method. Kaufman believes it is important that a christology be linked to the human person, Jesus of Nazareth.[11] Yet when we examine Kaufman's description of the concrete reality of Jesus in his historical context, we find the elaboration quite minimal. Kaufman summarizes what we know about Jesus in one long paragraph. Kaufman moves quickly from what we can learn from

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[10]Ibid., 393.

[11]Kaufman argues that it is due to the too close linkage of the term "Christ" with the man Jesus that we have had such wide discrepancies in the interpretation of the figure, Jesus—everything from "gentle Jesus, meek and mild," to a thirsty leader of crusades against the infidels. (*Mystery*, 391) I question this analysis. Is it not rather the great elasticity of the word "Christ" that is the problem, and the failure to tie the meaning of that term to the concrete reality of the Jesus we come to know through the stories of the Bible?

the particularity of Jesus to a series of ethical abstractions that are detached from the historical concreteness of Jesus (terms like humane, love, freedom). Kaufman's ethical functionalism seems to result in a position in which he first arrives at an ethical position, one that Kaufman believes leads to humane behavior and ecological responsibility. Jesus is defined in terms of this standard or function of ethics, rather than the standard of ethics being shaped by the concrete historical reality of Jesus.

I believe this reflects the deep influence of Kant on Kaufman. Jesus "illustrates," or is an example of, more general or abstract principles that emerge in the cosmic process. Perhaps Jesus was at one time necessary to introduce into the cosmic process certain values, but it is no longer necessary that the concrete Jesus remain central for Kaufman in defining the ethical. I believe that we lose the vividness and sharpness of the challenge of Jesus (as well as the way Jesus can empower us to a vision of the ethical life) that is evident, for example, in John H. Yoder's *Politics of Jesus*, Walter Wink's *Engaging the Powers*, or Glen Stassen's creative exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount in *Just Peacemaking*. In each of these cases, the vividness of Jesus' vision for life is illuminated by the careful reading of texts in their historical/cultural context. I cite as one example Walter Wink's interpretation of texts like "turn the other cheek" which suggest an aggressive nonviolence towards evil rather than either the path of passivity or violence.[12]

I want to be clear here that I am not saying that we are able simply to find some "objective" historical Jesus which can be the basis for a Christian ethic. A normative standard is presented to us in the human life of Jesus the Jew as his life was lived in the particular time and space of first-century Palestine through texts that are subject to interpretation both within their own context, but also in relationship to our own. Jesus is always subject to interpretation by a community. As norm or standard for our own humanity, Jesus is a symbol for that community and for us. It is not simply Jesus as historical object or the Bible as text that is the foundation for our faith, but Jesus as metaphor or symbol, who becomes norm or standard for us as we appropriate Jesus Christ into our lives to orient us and show us what it means to live a well-lived life. It is in the lives of the people of God, who view Jesus as the foundational metaphor both for God and humanity, that the spirit of this reality is *embodied* or appropriated in the

[12]Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 175f.

worship of the community and in the life of the members of that community as they live in the world. We must state emphatically, however, that we get our point of orientation from the concrete, culturally embodied Jesus. This is particularly crucial for any understanding of a theology of culture. We find our clue to our theology not in a disembodied "humane" essence, but in orienting our lives around the concrete alternative cultural vision made vivid in Jesus.

I believe that one of the reasons for our confusion about how to understand the relationship of Christ and culture is grounded in the influence of German idealist philosophical presuppositions on the definitional framework for understanding Christ and culture of Ernst Troeltsch and H.R. Niebuhr, traditions of thought that also deeply influence Kaufman.[13]

With the concept of a "religious *a priori*" Troeltsch sought to identify a universal religiosity that could undergird all of culture. This "religious idea" (heavily influenced by the philosophical tradition of German idealism) determines Troeltsch's definition of Jesus at the beginning of the *Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. Troeltsch does not describe the Jesus rooted in Jewish culture of first-century Palestine, because that Jesus would be too particular. Rather, the dominating concept is the prior notion of the "religious idea" (a universal ideal) which Jesus manifests. Jesus is concerned solely about God, "about the inward values of love and peace of heart and not at all concerned about social problems."[14] Insofar as Jesus expresses the purity of the religious idea, Jesus stands in opposition to culture, and insofar as adherents of the "sect type" try to follow Jesus, they by definition must stand in opposition to culture. Troeltsch's view of Jesus is thus controlled by his prior philosophical framework, not by inductive study of the Jesus of the Gospels understood in the light of first-century Palestinian Judaism. As a universal ideal independent of all particularity, religion also has the power to undergird all of culture. It is the church type (whose best and most complete expression in history was Medieval Christendom) which is able to integrate the religious idea into a positive

[13]Originally, I did this research in my dissertation. The best summary of the argument of that research is in my article, "A Critical Analysis of Troeltsch's Typology of Religious Association," in Max A. Myers and Michael M. LaChat, eds., *Studies in the Theological Ethics of Ernst Troeltsch* (Toronto: Studies in Theology, Vol. 49, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991).

[14]Friesen, "The Relationship between Ernst Troeltsch's Theory of Religion and his Typology of Religious Association" (Ph. D. dissertation, Harvard Divinity School, 1972), 218.

relationship with culture through "compromise," a concept very important in Troeltsch's writings.

Troeltsch's general theory of religion thus provides the framework for dealing with religion from two perspectives. It is a non-mediated *a priori* "idea" which is an expression of Divine Spirit. In this respect religion stands in sharp opposition to culture. On the other hand, this "idea" is expressed within the historical process in various institutional forms. In this respect the religious idea must always be synthesized with culture. This theory of religion enables Troeltsch to approach church history, both from the standpoint of radical opposition between religion and culture (sect) and the necessity for compromise between religion and culture (church).[15]

Both Reinhold Niebuhr and H.R. Niebuhr, very influential in giving shape to the discipline of social ethics in North America, were significantly influenced by Troeltsch's model. Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, conceptualized the ethical problem as how to relate the ideal of agape (the idealistic and "otherworldly" ethic of Jesus which *by definition* is *not* a social ethic) with a realistic view of the world. He rejected sectarian ethics, therefore, as by definition *irrelevant* to modern social ethics, and those which sought to relate a gospel ethic to social problems (social gospel or liberal pacifism) as inconsistent or utopian. That is a Troeltschian way of posing the issues.[16]

To understand H.R. Niebuhr's classic, *Christ and Culture*, one also needs to be knowledgeable of Troeltsch's work. Niebuhr did his dissertation on Troeltsch, and one can see the influence of Troeltsch throughout Niebuhr's writings. Niebuhr begins with a definition of Christ. Though Niebuhr's description of Christ in terms of "virtues" or "excellences" such as love, hope, obedience and humility, is not exactly like Troeltsch's description, the approach is very similar. They both begin by describing a Christ abstracted from his own cultural context. They both define Christ in such a way that if one were to have a "pure" relationship to this Christ, one would by definition stand in opposition to culture. "The *Christ* in the phrase *Christ and Culture* is thus the one who points us away from finite values to the Maker of all things."[17] Thus Niebuhr defines the problem as a tension between Christ *and* culture, as if the problem were an opposition between

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[15]Friesen, "A Critical Analysis," 218.
[16]Ibid., 47.
[17]For a much more complete recent analysis of Niebuhr than I can give here, see Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1988). See especially pp. 17-64. The quotation is from p. 41.

two monolithic entities separate from each other. This definition of the problem then determines the structure of the rest of the book, *Christ and Culture.* As in the case of Troeltsch, those who most faithfully seek to follow Christ are against culture by definition (Troeltsch's "sect" type). The "Christ of culture" type simply affirms culture, and that is obviously problematic because it means abandoning Christ. Then Niebuhr proceeds to describe three types, all of which assume a Christendom model (Troeltsch's "church" type). Niebuhr shows how two of these types, "Christ above culture," and "Christ and culture in paradox," while better than opposition and affirmation, are not as adequate as the last type, "Christ the transformer of culture." The last type is not critiqued. Niebuhr's entire work is not a "descriptive" analysis of the church's social ethic; rather, it is a "normative" argument, one in which the definition of the initial problem entails already the conclusion Niebuhr reaches. Similarly, I have shown the same process at work in Troeltsch whose purpose for writing the *Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* was not simply to describe the history of the church, but to recommend a direction for a future social ethic.[18]

Instead of beginning with a definition of "Christ" as an ideal in opposition to culture, I believe we must begin by defining the problem much differently. The Jewish tradition, out of which was born the early church, was a particular cultural expression. Jesus spoke the language, participated in the institutions, and defined his view of what it meant to honor God and love the neighbor within the particular social, political and economic context of his time. So rather than beginning with a Christ abstracted from his time and place, defined in terms of a religious idea (Troeltsch), the ideal of agape love (Reinhold Niebuhr), or virtues or excellences (H.R. Niebuhr), we must begin with the view of Christ as the concrete presence of God *in the world of culture.* We come to know and understand who we are called to be as we explore the meaning of a particular cultural identity.

Our task as Christians is to enter empathetically into the "language" of the culture of the Bible, there to discover an alternative cultural vision. I have begun with a definition of culture as language, and with a definition of religion as a symbol

[18]In "A Critical Analysis," I say: "The church-sect-mystic typology functions in Troeltsch as a model both to describe the basic ways the church has historically related to non-religious institutions such as the state, the economy and the family, and also as a prescription of the options that are available to the church in the modern world." (73)

system, in order to point out that every interpretation of the Christian faith belongs to or is an element of culture. Christians, like all other human beings, do not begin "outside" of culture. We do not start with a Christ distinct from culture. When we seek to interpret culture from a Christian perspective, we do that as persons who share with all human beings the "linguistic" foundation within which we interpret the meaning of our lives. We are religious, like other human beings, when we give an interpretation to our lives in the light of the root metaphor that defines our view of ultimate reality or God. A Christian theology, therefore, seeks to develop a critical analysis of various cultural options from the standpoint of a particular cultural perspective, in this case the vision of life manifested in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which has become embodied in a particular community, the church.[19]

The significance of the fact that Jesus Christ is *sarx* (flesh) provides a norm for a discriminating ethic within culture, not a norm which pulls one out of the world or makes one indifferent to the world. In other words, the early church vision provides one with an alternative cultural model to the predominating one of the time, not a norm over against culture. So rather than seeing Christ and culture as two monolithic entities standing in opposition to each other, I rather take a discriminating approach to culture, in the light of one particular cultural option. Such an approach allows for a variety of responses to the dominating culture within which one lives. One can affirm aspects of the dominating culture, in fact cooperate with it, because it is in harmony with a Christian cultural vision. One can learn from the surrounding culture, to supplement or enhance one's own vision. So the human wisdom or learning of the sciences, while not part

[19]I believe we have an excellent model of how to develop the engagement of an alternative cultural vision represented by Christ with current cultural models in Walter Wink's book, *Engaging the Powers*. I will briefly cite three examples of how Wink does this. One way is his contrast of the "myth of redemptive violence," which permeates the storyline of many T.V. programs, cartoons, and movies of our culture, with the story of Jesus, a story of sacrificial love. (13-31) Secondly, Wink contrasts the domination system (symbolized by domination hierarchies like patriarchy reinforced by a male God who exercises control through force) with the reign of God (kingdom of God) proclaimed and lived by Jesus as God's domination-free order (symbolized by relationships of equality between the sexes, reinforced by inclusive God images; see the chart on pp. 46-7). Thirdly, by interpreting Jesus' sayings in the Sermon on the Mount (such as "turn the other cheek") in cultural context, Wink is able to show that Jesus is not teaching nonresistance, but rather a style of nonviolent engagement as an alternative to quietism and violence. (174f)

of the original vision, can be incorporated into a Christian cultural vision. Aspects of the dominant culture may be seen as simply neutral, as for example, the language one uses. Some dimensions of the surrounding culture will be viewed ambiguously, as neither wholly good nor bad. Other elements of the surrounding culture will be viewed negatively, because to live one's life according to the values of the surrounding culture violates the vision of an alternative Christian culture.

I think that if we take Jesus Christ seriously as the central norm for a discriminating stance, this will also provide leverage for a critical stance to the Bible itself. The Anabaptists of the 16th century, for example, interpreted the Old Testament in the light of Christ. We must do the same for the New Testament as well. We must overcome an idolatrous biblicism in which we use the Bible (including the New Testament) to continue to support systems of oppression. An example of this is the hierarchical language with regard to men and women reflected in Pauline thought, or the suppression of women's status in the church, reflected in passages like I Timothy 2:11f. Such attitudes towards women stand in sharp contradiction to Jesus' attitude and behavior towards women. We must be willing to bring to bear a Christ-centered hermeneutic to New Testament texts, even as the 16th century Anabaptists use a Christ-centered ethic to critique the Old Testament teaching of an "eye for an eye" or the tradition of holy war.

The theological description of what it means to hold Jesus Christ as norm for our own humanity is, however, not a simple procedure. The interpretation of who Jesus is for us must be constructed anew in each generation and in every context. Our knowledge of Jesus is integrally connected with how we "confess" Jesus, or appropriate Jesus in our lives. The task of discerning who Jesus is for our lives, therefore, involves a complex interpretive process. The church is the context in which we discern what it means to be faithful to the story of Jesus. Commitment to Christ as norm means to commit ourselves as a people to an ongoing conversational process under the guidance of scripture in the face of a multitude of challenges.[20]

It does, however, seem to me that Kaufman could take the concrete historical event of Jesus more seriously than he does if

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[20]See John H. Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 15f.

he were to link the Jesus event more centrally with his concept of "serendipitous creativity." Jesus is a prime example of such creativity, that in the course of history a new event has occurred that has produced consequences that are surprising and were quite unpredictable at the time. I maintain that this event is still surprising and challenging to human life and culture. Kaufman's christology, I believe, would be strengthened if he were to embrace more fully the particularity of the Jesus of history as a norm that continues to challenge our ideas of what it means to be humane and responsible. I believe that such an orientation would lead to the development of an alternative cultural vision to the dominant visions of life in our culture that could be genuinely humanizing and creative in helping foster the "shalom of the city where we dwell."

Such an approach would challenge the christology of many Christians who conveniently relegate Jesus to a "separate" sphere of life (the spiritual) or to the afterlife, as an answer to their special concern about eternal life. Jesus is disconnected from living life responsibly before God in the world. When Christ is relegated to the "spiritual" and salvation is defined primarily in terms of life beyond the grave, Christians then uncritically legitimate the dominant political and economic system.

Many of the prevailing views of Jesus' death and resurrection are disconnected from his life and teaching. In the satisfaction theory of the atonement, the basic problem that must be satisfied is God's righteousness or justice. An innocent man, Jesus, must pay the debt owed to God. Jesus receives the punishment which sinners deserve, as a substitution for us. A second view draws upon the Old Testament images of expiatory sacrifice or blood atonement (see Lev. 4: 27-31). God is angry with people because of sin. People express sorrow (Heb. 9:11-14) for their sins by sacrificing their best to God (shedding the blood of the best lamb). God turns toward people favorably, forgiving their sin. So Christ offers himself to God (in his death) as the supreme sacrifice. Through his sacrifice for sinners, the slain lamb who sheds his blood, Christians who believe are forgiven and accepted by God. In the "ransom theory" image, human beings are captured by sin, held in bondage. The devil must be paid a ransom in order for him to release sinners. Christ pays the price by giving his innocent life. Sinners who believe are released from bondage.

In each of these views of the meaning of Christ's death, the death of Christ is *necessary* in order to satisfy God or the devil. An innocent victim must die. Salvation is achieved through an act

of violence. In each case death is a necessity for salvation in a way that is unrelated to the life and teachings of Jesus. Jesus' life is only significant in the sense that it demonstrates that Jesus is an innocent victim. Furthermore, in all of these cases, the death of Jesus is unrelated to ethics, to our responsibility before God. The purpose of Jesus' death is related to our salvation beyond death.[21]

I propose another way of understanding Christ as aimed at *transforming people*, rather than primarily satisfying God or the devil. Such a view of Christ provides a point of leverage for a critique of both Old and New Testament texts which legitimate a view of God and ourselves that breeds irresponsibility and leads to violence and oppression. Christians who orient their lives around Jesus, both as a symbol of God and the human, not just in the sense of intellectual assent to the idea of Jesus, but who trust in his way and in the power of this way to bring about wholeness in the universe, will inevitably reflect in their lives and communities an alternative cultural vision. Thus, Jesus' life and death are directly connected to the meaning of ethical responsibility. Jesus' life and death are models for the kind of people Christians are to be—to love like Jesus, even our enemies, to serve others like him, to be willing to lay down our lives for others like he did for us. In other words, the Jesus way becomes a model or standard for a community which is an alternative to the values of the dominant culture. Through Christ Christians are set free from bondage to the old age and called to be participants with Christ in inaugurating a new age (Col. 2:13-15; Gal. 3:23-28).[22] The implication of this view of Christ is that the church should not split apart the spiritual and ethical, this life and the life to come. Both dimensions are integrally connected to the one salvation brought about by God in Christ. Being a new community of shalom in the world, and seeking the shalom of the city where the church dwells, is, therefore, central and integral to the Gospel, the good news.

Such a vision should not isolate Christians from their fellow humans, but draw them into solidarity and a common endeavor with other human beings from secular perspectives and other religious traditions. Christians should identify and support the

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[21]See the development of an alternative theology of atonement for a non-Constantinian church by J. Denny Weaver, "Atonement for the Nonconstantinian Church," *Modern Theology* 6 (July 1990): 307-323.

[22]For a more complete description of this new model, see chapter 4 in my book *Christian Peacemaking and International Conflict* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1986).

vision of wholeness symbolized by Christ wherever it is present in the universe. Though as Christians we come to know vividly the vision of wholeness in the concrete particularity of Jesus, we affirm and participate with others (from secular humanist to Buddhist monk) in nurturing that vision wherever it is manifest. Jesus provides vision and empowerment for our lives as Christians, but it is ultimately not Jesus himself, but the *way* that he symbolizes that should orient our lives within culture.

Chapter 7

Aspects of a Postmodern Paradigm for an Ecological Age

Carl S. Keener

Over two decades ago John Platt wrote in *Science* that "there is only one crisis in the world . . . the crisis of transformation."[1] The human race, he stated, is "on a steeply rising 'S-curve' of change," and when translated in terms of our daily lives this means that nearly all aspects of our existence are touched by stupendous changes unheard of only a century ago. Platt went on to muse what sorts of crises might reach an explosive point "in the next 10 years" (i.e., by 1979): "nuclear escalation, famine, participatory crises, racial crises, . . . crises of administrative legitimacy." And then he added that what makes these crises so dangerous is that they are increasingly a "crisis of crises all at one time." Platt wondered whether our world could have survived a Cuban missile crisis, an East coast power blackout and a dead hot line if these all had occurred in the same day. Platt suggested in 1969 that we may have a mere 50/50 chance of reaching 1980, and that what was required were large-scale solutions to large-scale problems. This is no place to analyze in detail Platt's "big fixes," but his notion of mobilized task forces tackling these various problems is surely a starting point for further thought and action, especially now as we approach the year 2001. Moreover, how does a modern theologian "do" theology in times like these?

To be sure, numerous critics have written about the decline of the West, the dissolution of the Scala Naturae with its rigid hierarchy and Newtonian mechanism embracing a rigid determinism, materialism, strict empiricism, and sensationalistic epistemology. For example, nearly 50 years ago, Pitirim A. Sorokin pointed out that there was an epochal struggle—a crisis—involving a decaying sensate order with an emerging and creative force of an idealistic order.[2] And in his *Theology for the Third Millennium,* Hans Küng called for a new postmodern paradigm involving a "critical ecumenical theology" to help

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[1]J. Platt, "What We Must Do," *Science* 116 (1969): 1115-1121.

[2]P.A. Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 205.

humans cope with the forthcoming stupendous problems of the 21st century.[3]

Some of the realities of our era helping refashion a postmodern, non-Newtonian paradigm include, according to Küng, a "polycentric world ecumene," 20th century liberation movements, greater sensitivity to injustices to women, non-whites, and the Third World, increasing doubt with respect to the powers of science, technology and industrialism, a new environmental consciousness, and the overwhelming destructiveness of the modern false god, Progress.[4]

Perhaps, too, what is needed is a new root metaphor enabling us to focus our energies toward a more humane village.[5] This essay aims, thus, to examine several recent currents which I think can contribute to a paradigmatic shift leading to a different outlook concerning the cosmos. All of us think and act and make moral decisions from within the context of some worldview, some overarching perspective, and it's my hope we can reflect thoughtfully on what such a perspective might be if *Homo sapiens* is to survive the 21st century. And in this respect at least, Gordon Kaufman's systematic work is significant in that he considers as part of his task to incorporate modern currents into his imaginative construction of a twentieth century vision of God.

We turn, then to an outline of some major currents now shaping the contours of a new paradigm, what H. K. Schilling once called the new consciousness in science and religion.[6] Certainly one of the most important aspects of a modern conceptuality involves an ecosystematic perspective, that the earth is not merely a Rubik's Cube, but that disturbing the universe, to borrow a phrase from Freeman Dyson, does have irreversible consequences.[7] Once thought an arcane subject, ecology has surely come a long way from the days of Ernst Haeckel who in 1866 coined the term to mean, literally, the study of living things in relation to their home.

Sparked by Rachel Carson's prophetic voice, "Earth Day," celebrated initially in April, 1970, set the stage for a veritable explosion of books, pamphlets, fliers, and bumper stickers ("Have

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[3]H. Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 205.
[4]Ibid., 198.
[5]Concerning root metaphors, see S. Pepper, *World Hypotheses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).
[6]H. K. Schilling, *The New Consciousness in Science and Religion* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1973).
[7]F. Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

you thanked a green plant today?").[8] Some of the hoopla died down quickly of course, but the problems and the need for an ecological perspective remain more serious than ever.

What are ecologists trying to tell us? One of my teachers, the late Robert MacArthur, suggested that, fundamentally, ecologists ask two basic questions: 1) How many tent caterpillars will there be next year (i.e., the question concerning the causes of increase/decrease of natural populations), and 2) Why does a robin lay four eggs, or a columbine have spurred petals (i.e., the question concerning the nature of adaptation). And if we understand the nature of increase/decrease of populations, we will, in turn, understand the nature of adaptation. The basic question of ecology is, then, how common will species S be at time T at place P?

All this appears innocent enough, yet in any case, can ecology contribute insights to our corporate wisdom pertaining to the survival of the human species? Barry Commoner believed so and he suggested four basic "laws" fundamental to our understanding of the nature of ecosystems. Law 1: Everything is connected to everything else (This is the idea of a WEB, to which I shall return later); Law 2: Everything must go somewhere, i.e., there is no such thing as pure waste, only CYCLES; Law 3: Nature "knows" best, an arguable point inasmuch as many smart humans think they can improve natural processes; Law 4: There is no such thing as a free lunch, i.e., energy is always required to construct and maintain systems of order.[9]

To these "laws" I'll add several "thought" questions for reflection inasmuch as some of them have no certain answer: 1) Has Planet Earth yet struck the big iceberg? (The analogy refers to the White Star liner, Titanic.) 2) Are the ecosystems of the Earth like a Rubik's Cube in that no matter how badly they are messed up, they can always be manipulated to the original pristine state? 3) Given that at time T0, a bacterium is placed in a test tube, the number of bacteria doubles every minute, the tube becoming full of bacteria in 60 minutes, when is the tube a quarter-full? Half-full? This question, while seemingly trivial, does point out the immense differences between exponential thinking and linear or straight-line thinking.

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[8]R. Carson, *Silent Spring* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1962).

[9]B. Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man and Technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

A key point from modern ecology, then, is that within an ecosystem all objects are in some way interrelated. There are simply no self-contained units or entities.

A second major current shaping the contours of a new paradigm is a radical empirical evolutionism. In its simplest aspects, evolution means "change," but there must be both contingent and historical components to such changes. As applied to populations of living things, evolution is, as Darwin stated, "descent with modification," which occurs, in Darwin's words, by means of the "accumulation of successive slight favourable variations."[10] Now Darwinism implies evolution, but the converse need not be the case (e.g., Lamarckism attempts also to explain evolutionary changes in living things, but the mechanisms are different from those invoked in Darwinism). And in fact, as Ernst Mayr pointed out, Darwin's evolutionary paradigm consisted of at least five components: evolution as such, evolution by common descent, gradualism (i.e., no saltations), populational speciation, and natural selection.[11] Since much confusion centers around Darwin's view of natural selection (developed, in large part, by his study of variation in domestic pigeons), I want to focus a bit on the meaning of natural selection within a Darwinian context. As Darwin wrote in the Origin, natural selection is the "preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations."[12] Basically, natural selection is the preservation of slight, but useful variations which favor those individuals in the "struggle for existence" which Darwin understood as a *metaphor* meaning "dependence of one being on another" and "success in leaving progeny."[13]

The biological theory of natural selection is simple enough: it consists of five facts plus three inferences. The first three facts pertain to the relative size of natural populations: populations have potentially unlimited fertility, yet remain more or less stable due to various environmental constraints (space, resources). These facts imply a "struggle" for existence—not all organisms live to reproduce. The final two facts deal with inheritance: individuals of a species differ with respect to certain traits, and these

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[10]C. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* [hereafter, *Origin*] (London: John Murray, 1859; facsimile reissue, with an Introduction, Bibliography and Index, edited by E. Mayr. New York: Athenaeum, 1967), 459.

[11]E. Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), 505ff.

[12]Darwin, *Origin*, 81.

[13]Ibid., 62.

differences are inherited. Now if differential reproduction depends (at least in part) on the hereditary constitution of the surviving individuals then over many generations there will be gradual but significant changes within a species. All this doesn't sound very revolutionary, but the logic is such that "*if* there is variation, *if* the variants differ in fitness, and if the variations are inherited, then there is evolutionary change—sometimes."[14]

Nevertheless, the Darwinian conceptual revolution was immense. It swept away the foundations of the old hellenistic Scala Naturae with its fixed, timeless, hierarchical structures. In fact, Ernst Mayr, the current senior archetypal Darwinist, maintained that the impact of the Darwinian revolution not only revolutionized our understanding of the origin of species, but it had certain critical philosophical implications as well, including the following important concepts:

1. The cosmos itself evolves, i.e., it is not static and fixed (contrast this with the Scala Naturae, an eternally fixed order).
2. An ahistorical scientific creationism is implausible.
3. The principle of descent with modification is applied also to humans.
4. Within the biological world "design" is the result of a process "consisting of an interaction between nondirected variation and opportunistic reproductive success."
5. Darwinism precludes any prepatterned cosmic teleology.
6. Essentialism is now replaced by population thinking (emergentism).[15]

The last two points, especially, require additional comment. As such, population thinking stresses individual differences, that all creatures are unique, and that the individual is basically more important than the type or class to which the individual belongs. These individual differences are real, and are not therefore mere accidental departures from some eternally fixed mean or type.

With respect to teleology, Darwinism runs counter to views which argue for a pre-patterned, fixed plan within the world of living things. In any case, there is an immense jump when one surveys the patterns and processes within local populations and then extrapolates from these a fundamental worldview, an architectonic for the entire universe. It is at this point that metaphysical Darwinism (i.e., Darwinism elevated to a

[14]M. Ghiselin, *The Triumph of the Darwinian Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 72.

[15]Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought*, 501.

worldview) runs into serious difficulties. It's one thing to discount prepatterned harmonies. It's quite another matter to argue that the patterns and processes seen within the natural world have no meaning. In any case, why the universe has the structures it has and how fundamental evolutionary changes are effected within the cosmos present immense problems which lie beyond the scope of this essay. How to distill an overall *purpose* within an evolutionary process which maximizes an interplay between freedom and order remains, for me, one of the central problems for any philosophical theology, and at present I see no easy solution.[16] What is not at issue is whether evolution occurs within our cosmic epoch. What is at issue is whether a mechanistic Darwinism can account for all the changes seen within natural populations, including the emergence of new forms of living things.[17]

A radical empirical evolutionist, then, regards the cosmos as a structure (i.e., a system of some order) with both a historical and an emergent component—the changes are real and they have histories. In brief, there is a contingent temporal emergence of new structures, which relates directly to what Kaufman called "serendipitous cosmic creativity."[18] This leads to a discussion of a third major current, a process-relational metaphysics.

One of the theses of this paper is that the cosmos is of a piece, that it has had a single history involving events in process, and that, in principle, we can understand something of that history. In a sense, this view reflects the heart of a philosophy of process. Although a process-relational metaphysics has ancient roots, its systematic development is largely an outgrowth of the Darwinian revolution of the 19th century, and the revolution in physics (chiefly relativity theory and quantum mechanics) which occurred during the early part of this century. Built largely on the speculative work of A. N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, process philosophy seeks logical clarity and coherence, and, insofar as possible, aims for an adequate and applicable

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[16]For a further discussion of this knotty problem, see L. Ford's review of L. Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History* in *Process Studies* 7 (1977): 215-216, and D. R. Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).

[17]For a trenchant philosophical discussion of the relation of mechanism to the emergence of mind, see C.D. Broad, *The Mind and Its Place in Nature* (London: Kegan Paul, 1937).

[18]G.D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), Fig. 4.

interpretation of all data of experience.[19] Process philosophers assume an empirical realism, i.e., process philosophy is naturalistic (science is taken seriously), historicist, and evolutionary. Moreover, processes (processive actualities or events in process) are more important and more "real" than static substances, and in this view, individuals, themselves in process, are seen as *experiencing* and *relating* selves. For Whitehead, a thing comes to be by *prehending* previous events (things) and then integrating these events in a novel way. Objects therefore are the result of developmental patterns sustaining the historic routes of successive acts.[20] Reality thus is processive through and through, and realities within the world are themselves radically relational.[21]

To be sure, a process-relational metaphysics represents one of several possible views within western thought. In this view reality consists of "events" (which Whitehead called "actual occasions") participating in asymmetrically changing but structured (i.e., orderly) relationships, with space and time inextricably linked to all emergents here regarded as evolving structures. Hence, Nature consists of structured adaptations with possibilities for change, and whose real affinities reflect proximity of descent. The natural world therefore is an inclusive interrelated "hierarchy" with a history. Human nature, too, is dynamic, open to novelty, and to its own unique transcendence. Moreover, emergentists, as proponents of this view can be called, see "truth" as a system of organized mental abstractions ("World 3," in Sir Karl Popper's usage) more or less corresponding to evolved real histories of interrelated structural emergences of which our human experiences serve as primary examples. In this view the world is unfinished, in flux, and consists of interrelational energy events undergoing various social processes.

In contrast, a rival major historical worldview (essentialism) influencing western thought maintains that the cosmos consists of substances having various attributes (predicates). In this view time is somehow less real than eternity, whatever that is.

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[19]Both Whitehead and Hartshorne were prolific writers, and, in Hartshorne's case, covering the years 1934 to 1990. Whitehead's magnum opus was *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929; corrected edition by D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne. New York: The Free Press, 1978). See also Hartshorne's major work, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1970).

[20]R. C. Neville, "Contributions and Limitations of Process Philosophy," *Process Studies* 16 (1987): 283-298.

[21]E. Fontinell, "Faith and Metaphysics Revisited," *Cross Currents* 38 (1988): 129-145.

Moreover, the structures of the cosmos are permanent, and thus exhibit a designed order in which classes ("types") are more real than the individuals dimly reflecting these types. Being is thus seen to consist of self-contained units externally related in both time and space to other such units. But note that in this view there are no contingencies and no real creativity, only repeatability, and evolution, as such, is impossible.

Essentialism, thus, tends toward sharp, more or less disconnected dualisms (mind/matter, time/eternity, good/evil, God/world, human/animal, spiritual/material). Reality consists of permanently ordered essences or archetypes (ideas, eternal objects), and "matter" therefore involves ordered structures ("atoms") located in space which is a kind of "receptacle." Hence, Nature consists of harmonious balances ("balance of nature" view) among objects (creatures) whose apparent affinities reflect the underlying plan or design of creation. The natural world therefore is an exclusive hierarchy of self-contained objects which has been variously named as the Scala Naturae or Chain of Being.[22]

There are many defenders of essentialism, notably the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Orthodoxy. It's not my purpose to offer at length an apology for either view, although it should be clear from my remarks that I side with the emergentists, and it should be apparent also that Kaufman is an emergentist, although he does not subscribe as whole-heartedly as I do to the systematic work of Whitehead and Hartshorne. Why we prefer one view over another view may at times be hard to explain, although there is some evidence that an individual's personality may dispose one toward a particular world hypothesis.[23]

To sum up the preceding points, the new historicist, postmodern paradigm is *ecosystematic*, *evolutionary*, and *interrelational*. Moreover, power, freedom, and creativity are qualities of every concrete particular emerging within this cosmic epoch. In short, in the last four centuries there has been a steady

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[22]This immensely influential idea has been acutely developed in A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1936; Harper Torchbooks edition, 1960).

[23]For an analysis of the relationship of personality to one's philosophical views, see J. A. Johnson, C. K. Germer, J. S. D. Efran and W.F. Overton, "Personality as the Basis of Theoretical Predilections," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 55 (1988): 824-835.

triumph of the vision of *becoming* over that of static *being*.[24] We turn now to the fourth major current, that of conceiving God as the central focus in the universe.

What is the meaning of God in human experience, to borrow a phrase from W. E. Hocking's magisterial book by this title? Classical theists saw God as hellenistic perfection personified and this meant a God of total power, a God in control of all events. On the other hand, theistic naturalists, themselves heterodox theists, generally view God primarily as good, an agapeistic force within the universe. In this view, at least, God is prevailingly love—God enriches, nourishes, enables, and finally, calls us home. But the fly in this metaphysical ointment is evil. Is evil real, but a smaller part of a greater, more encompassing good? Is evil chiefly the outcome of the misuse of human freedom? Is evil somehow ingrained in the finitude of the structures of existence such that evils (or some of them) are themselves rooted in finitude?[25] Or is evil merely an illusion, subject primarily to our own mistaken notions?

One key to this problem, I think, is to envision God as both good (Love) and powerful (Creative). But opt for an all-controlling power and humans become mere flickering shadows on the cave of our subjectivity—we see ourselves dance for a little while before God whisks us off the screen for a new set of dancers. Opt for consummate goodness and God becomes personified as one who struggles with us creatively to overcome the evils we feel and know, to deal with nature red in tooth and claw, as Tennyson phrased it. Nevertheless, God as omnipotent means, ultimately, that we are robots. But God as goodness means, ultimately, that evil will never be fully overcome—the universe will always have certain recalcitrant aspects. However one works out this theological problem, the outcome is of immense significance. As Gordon Kaufman so well reminded us, we become like the God we worship, but unless the God one worships relativizes everything else and humanizes those who worship, that God is an idol.[26] Need I remind a perceptive reader the sort of God worshiped by idealistic but materialistic Americans, hellbent on destroying the earth.

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[24]This gradual shift has been thoroughly discussed by F. L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950* (New York: Macmillan, 1977).

[25]M. H. Suchocki, *The End of Evil* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 2.

[26]G.D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 274ff.

Traditional theism views God as Wholly-Other, infinite, perfect, self-contained, impassible, all-powerful, all-knowing, and simple. All this adds up to the implication that God doesn't really need the world, or the earth, and, in fact, on this view, if the earth blew up by means of some super-atomic holocaust, God actually wouldn't be affected at all! This concept of God has got to die! If God (or whatever spirit pervades throughout the cosmos) is not internally related to and enriched by the processive-relational universe, can the created order—the species and individuals—have any purpose other than their mere instrumental value? Indeed, what value is there in saving the planet? Why not maximize the lust for things in our lives? What value are humans if one doesn't believe that somehow one's life contributes to God's enrichment, to God's enjoyment of the universe, or at least, to the sum total of good on this planet?

Still, the problems concerning the nature and agency of God are immense, and I don't propose any ready solution.[27] I agree with Aldous Huxley that "it is in the light of our beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality that we formulate our conceptions of right and wrong; and it is in the light of our conceptions of right and wrong that we frame our conduct, not only in the relationships of private life, but also in the sphere of politics and economics. So far from being irrelevant, our metaphysical beliefs are the finally determining factor in all our actions."[28]

We have said that God is the central focus of the universe, but how we envision that focus is, I think, subject to many variables—the communities that helped shape us, our temperament, our schooling, the books we read, and the like. As Brand Blanshard pointed out, "[i]n the religious tradition of the West, two very different notions have been entertained of the ultimate nature of things and, in consequence, of the ultimate government of the world."[29] One strand belongs to the idealism of Spinoza, Hegel, Green, Royce, and Bradley which "identifies God with an absolute mind enhancing all things in an intelligible whole." The other strand, identified with Christianity, views "God as a Person distinct from the world, though its creator and

[27]Gordon Kaufman's corpus has dealt at length with this problem. The reader is urged to study especially *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), and *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[28]A. Huxley, *Ends and Means* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1937), 10.

[29]B. Blanshard, *Reason and Belief* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974), 523.

sustainer."[30] Whatever one makes of these two strands, constructing a concept of God suitable for a postmodern ecosystematic age remains, in my opinion, one of the most difficult, yet necessary, challenges of our time.

One of the strengths of Gordon Kaufman's work is that human visions of God are cast in symbolic terms which always issue in imaginative constructions.[31] These imaginative constructions of God are to be worked out in the face of mystery,[32] but if our constructions do not somehow impel us to become more humane, and if our vision of God does not relativize everything else, our vision of God is an idol.[33] For Kaufman, the test of an imaginative construction, thus, is its pragmatic power to inspire humans toward a more humane existence. This calls for an aesthetic judgment of competing values.

Here I side with the process theologians who see God primarily as a lure inspiring an increasing harmony and peace among the creatures. But God in the sense of the absolute idealists, can also be seen as the underlying structure of reality, a reality that is "an all-inclusive system whose parts are necessarily related."[34] Now Kaufman's constructive efforts appear, I think, to blend both these visions. Our symbol (or vision) of God must somehow account for the interrelatedness of the entire cosmos, yet inspire us, as humans, toward creative peacemaking and a humane life.

In any case, all concepts of God—ancient or modern—have immense difficulties in dealing satisfactorily with the basic issues of the origin of design, freedom, and evil. And yet, as an abiding belief, we hold there is a central focus in the universe, and this focus—call it God—has called forth persons capable of responding to goodness and love, but a focus which also has called forth the flowers, birds, myriads of insects, as well as the immense galaxies with their billions of stars scattered about in a big, old, and complex universe beyond our comprehension. This is, I think, one of the key points in Kaufman's *In the Face of Mystery*. Nevertheless, our view of God, whatever it is, is, I think, supremely important for it represents our central focus whereby we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). And this leads

[30]Ibid.
[31]For a readable historical review of this general problem, see K. Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).
[32]Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*.
[33]Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination*, 17, 154.
[34]B. Blanshard, *Reason and Belief*, 523.

me to a brief consideration of a fifth current, that of value—moral and aesthetic.

Our century has exhibited a moral wasteland. Together with the history of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Vietnam, plus a hundred million killed in military action during this century alone, can we hum Robert Browning's cheerful line, "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world"? How do we cope with the sickening despoliation of our planet, the constant threat of terrorism and nuclear war, pestilences such as AIDS, scorching famines, and stresses of all kinds? Is this disheartening mess the best that can be said for the era of Newton, an era of sharply honed mechanism, of smart machines, microchips, and fast rockets? Can Kierkegaard, or Nietzsche, or Marx, or Freud provide helpful insights toward a solution? Will a return to the old-time religion do? How about more education? Indeed, what kind of theology can be written for a nuclear age?[35]

It is not my intention here to outline a well-reasoned moral philosophy, nor, for that matter, to recount the history of moral philosophy from, say, Bentham and Mill to Stevenson, Hare, MacIntyre, Blanshard, and others. As I see it, there is no well-demarcated current shaping the contours of a postmodern moral philosophy. In any case, a postmodern conceptuality must deal with moral and political issues, but what is so disheartening is that too often writers engage in sermonizing or moralizing or even logic chopping without then coming to grips with the root issues. And too often ethics or moral philosophy appears disengaged from the real problems confronting our survival on this planet.[36]

In one of the finest essays on moral philosophy I have read, Brand Blanshard, the late Sterling Professor of Philosophy at Yale, maintained that reason can be applied to fundamental issues in ethics and religion just as effectively as it can be applied to metaphysics and science.[37] Blanshard held that moral judgments do express knowledge (and not only one's feelings), and therefore such judgments are primarily a *cognitive* function. Moreover, Blanshard argued for the objective rightness of our acts, which,

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[35]G.D. Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985).

[36]For an analysis of this general problem, see R. C. Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origin of the Social Contract* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1990).

[37]B. Blanshard, "Practical Reason: Reason and Feeling in 20th Century Ethics," in E. Freeman, ed., *The Abdication of Philosophy: Philosophy and the Public Good* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1976).

to be right, must be conducive to some good, i.e., "the rightness of conduct turns on the intrinsic values it brings into existence."[38] This, of course, is a teleological ethics, an ethics based on *consequences* springing from a reasoned judgment, in contrast to an ethics based primarily on *duty* or *subjective feelings* or *emotions*.

But this leads to a second major problem for moral philosophers which has to do with *what* is the *good*, and its subsidiary problem of whether right/wrong is established in virtue of their relation to good/evil, or the other way round. Now Blanshard maintained that an *experience* is *good* to the degree that it *fulfills* human impulses and yet generates a feeling of *satisfaction*. Whether or not one agrees with Blanshard here (and if not, what is the "good" in a moral sense?), he is correct, I think, in holding that such value judgments are either true or false, and reside therefore in a basic *objective* moral philosophy reflective of the work of Green, Sidgwick, Moore, Rashdall, Prichard, Ross, Joseph, Carritt, Ewing, Broad, and others. Such judgments call for an acute sensitivity within a group of interpreters, a point to which I shall return. And such judgments will reflect, I think, the degree of humaneness one has achieved.

Take, for example, the knotty problems of abortion and euthanasia. The extreme view, of course, is that human zygotes (fertilized eggs) are as intrinsically valuable as you and I, and that, at all costs, the life of a human being should be ensured by *whatever means* both at its beginning and at its end. But to what moral foundation, if any, does one appeal to retain a 90-year old Alzheimer's victim on a respirator? What are the basic ethical principles underlying an intention to preserve all human zygotes? And do we judge our answers in terms of an overarching transcendental ethics of duty, or in terms of long-range consequences of our actions, or what? Speaking personally, do I have a moral right to expect taxpayers to bear a heavy financial burden to keep me alive for twenty years if, at 65, I should be stricken with an irreversible brain coma? Do I have, as a feeble and senile elderly person, a moral right to expect others to use natural resources to keep me alive and thus rob the next generation of humans a possible access to those resources? At what point does one lay one's life down for the sake of the species (cf. I John 3:16)? And who decides? The answers are not simple, especially because there is a sharp clash between a good-hearted Christian ethical theory and a hard-headed biologically-

[38]Blanshard, *Reason and Belief*, 398.

based realism. But no matter how we answer these questions, our acts do have both immediate and long-range consequences, and when thought out, our decisions do rest finally upon some basic moral insight.

Nevertheless, if ethics deals with values, how then does one argue cogently for the relative goodness of one act over that of another, of, say, abortion/non-abortion? We cannot take more time to discuss these exacerbating questions, except to point out that their solution must be cast against a backdrop of the webwork of relationships we have been advocating. A teleological, rational ethics tempered with passionate feeling will attempt, insofar as possible, to render effective judgments about probable consequences, and to do this adequately requires the corporate wisdom of an enlightened community.[39] But the judgments must be cast not only in the light of the received wisdom of the past, or in the light of present emergencies, but they must be cast in the light of the future well-being of the species. Whatever our views might be about ethics and moral decision-making, I hold, with G. E. Moore, that it is self-evident we have a moral obligation to make the world a better place than when we found it. And this calls for what B. E. Meland called an appreciative awareness of the breadth and depth of experience, an *appreciative awareness*, that is, of the history of the human species, of the lives of other creatures, of the complexities of the biosphere, and of the welfare of future generations of humans. This is why I think some version of a teleological ethics must enter the conversations about the sustainability of the planet and the continued survival and well-being of the human species.

This isn't to dismiss passion or feeling or even sentimentality, i.e., "fineness and intelligence of feeling."[40] Without compassionate and caring feelings for the plight of other beings, for the earth, and for ourselves, I doubt whether our utopian cures and rational judgments will effect the changes we want.[41] Unless we feel a moral outrage at the inhuman injustices we see,

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[39]Blanshard was alive to the difficult problems concerning justice, duty, self-interest, the communitarian good, and that at times justice may perforce override utilitarian goals. See especially P.A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard* (La Salle: Open Court, 1980), 434. For a critical study of this problem, see H. W. B. Joseph, *Some Problems in Ethics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931).

[40]R. C. Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origin of the Social Contract*, 236.

[41]A sustained and finely reasoned argument that thought, feeling, and action are all aspects of human conduct is given in M. Midgley, *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

unless we are deeply stirred by the aesthetic dimensions of life, I wonder to what degree a person can cultivate a passion for justice, for humaneness. And we learn this in community—communities of feeling in which both positive and negative emotions tempered by reason play a role in shaping the development of justice within that community. Caring for each other and for the earth is the basis of justice—"without caring, there can be no justice,"[42] a theme echoed resolutely in Charles Birch's fine book, *A Purpose for Everything*.[43] This leads me now to a brief discussion of the last modern current I want to discuss.

A sixth modern current is the realization that interpretation (of the world) is no simple affair, but it is a complex interaction involving a community of interpreters rooted to a common language (or symbol system) and a common history. In a sense, such an emphasis isn't really new. For example, the Anabaptists of the 16th century held that the Bible is to be discussed and understood within the context of a believing community. The Word was not to be dispensed merely from on high, nor conveyed by means of a heavy-handed authoritative and patriarchal tradition, nor interlaced with lots of hellenistic metaphysics—not that great preaching, tradition, and philosophical theology don't have their place. But *understanding* was a community affair, and in this respect the historic Anabaptists were a remarkable parallel to modern scientific communities.[44]

Let me summarize in broad strokes the key theses of this essay, and offer along with each thesis at least one implication for reflection along with a comment concerning Kaufman's recent theological work.

1. The cosmos, and in particular, the earth, has had a single history of interconnected events. Within this cosmic epoch there are no self-contained, isolated structures. The ecological axiom of *relationality*is evolutionary and organicistic. This is a thoroughly naturalistic view, a view which regards humans every bit as much a part of the biosphere as the water, air, animals and plants around us. There is no attempt to escape to another world—the earth, for now, at least, is our home. In Kaufman's Christian theological construction his small steps of faith begin, rightly, in

[42]R. C. Solomon, *A Passion for Justice*, 199.

[43]C. Birch, *A Purpose for Everything* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990).

[44]For a discussion of the importance of communities of interpreters, see R.S. Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987).

my opinion, with the view that the world is an "evolutionary ecosystem."[45]

2. The world consists of evolving structures located within a webwork of relationships. Old structures evolve into new structures; hence, there is process and change. And Kaufman's theology is postmodern in that it is constructed within a backdrop of an ever-changing, yet interrelated series of events. Humans, too, are a part of this evolutionary history. Until we acknowledge and treasure the common evolutionary history we share with all organisms—plants, fungi, animals, protists, and archaebacteria—I do not see how we can begin the long process of healing our planet. How can we truly identify with other living organisms if we falsify our own history, or if we ignore that history, or even if we deny that history? Truth, as Brand Blanshard often pointed out, has a moral component.

3. A process-relational metaphysics can provide a philosophical conceptuality to continue the constructive metaphysical work necessary to formulate a synoptic view of this complex universe. This instrument of vision, to be sure, consists of fallible forms and symbols, as B. E. Meland would remind us, but it does reach into all areas of human life: *physical* (It relates us to the stuff of stars), *intellectual* (It deals persistently with "why" questions), *emotional* (It claims that relationality involves feeling—a sensitive awareness of the complexities of the world), *aesthetic* (It holds that the finite world is a mix of harmony/disharmony, and moreover that this finitude is very much an integral part of the structures of the cosmos), *moral* (It sees love—the creative enrichment of other creatures—as fundamental to God's incarnation within the universe), and *religious* (It inspires one to worship God as the Fellow Sufferer who understands and who provides a harmonizing focus for all forms of existence). While not embracing directly a process-relational metaphysics, Kaufman's work certainly is not counter to this metaphysics. In any case, Kaufman has not constructed his theology from within a static, essentialist framework.

4. A reconstructed concept of God as central focus envisions God as both immanent and transcendent. For the Christian, the nature and agency of God are seen best in the life of Christ whose cross, in turn, provides the *central focus* for the Church (the Beloved Community, as Royce called it). As such, God is a persuasive *lure*, inviting the creatures to prehend God's aims,

[45]Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, Fig. 4.

thus co-creating a world of greater enrichment and satisfaction. Such a view, I think, can lead to the "development of pacific souls,"[46] persons themselves working toward a healing of the planet, enriching the lives of other persons, and possessing a vision of justice such that all nations, kindreds, and tongues can live fruitful lives together. This, I take it, would also be Kaufman's claim and central message. In brief, Mennonites can be known as the Community of the Cross of Christ, and this is, I think, a distinctive religious claim.

5. A moral and aesthetic vision involves fostering a creative enrichment of all persons and this means an advance toward what Bernard Loomer called SIZE or stature.[47] The greater our internal relationship is toward our environment, including other persons, the greater our SIZE, but this requires an increasing appreciative awareness of the rich complexity of our biosphere and its history of complex interrelations. Moreover, moral judgments must be rendered within the context of the whole, of making the world a more humane planet. A teleological ethics will judge our acts in terms of the consequences of those acts measured according to the overall enrichment of life these acts bring forth. As Kaufman has argued so eloquently, Christ provides the clue to a humanizing vision of God and what a truly humane person will do. But how do we re-establish communities of justice, of moral and aesthetic sensitivity and refinement? And where are such communities? Can the Mennonite Community of the Cross of Christ be such an exemplary community?

6. New visions, spawned from an ongoing serendipitous human creativity, must be brought to a community of interpreters. Otherwise, new ideas, like new genes, will perish, and hence not become a part of the matrix of a creative advance. As such, however, our inspirations are not to be derived chiefly from our abstractions, our fallible forms and symbols, our summae, our scientific and philosophical syntheses, but from a sensitive awareness of the concrete, experiential processes that a holistic attachment to life requires. Nowhere in his theological work, so far as I know, does Kaufman argue for radical disconnected dualisms. Our symbols and metaphors—fallible as they are—connect us in some manner to reality. Our symbol "God" thus can become the symbol of the "ultimate reality with which

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[46]D. R. Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 11.

[47]W. Dean, "Bernard Loomer and the Irony of Empiricism," *Process Studies* 16 (1987): 264-274.

we humans have to do."[48] Thus a postmodern paradigm for an ecological age will have a basic instrument of vision (i.e., some basic perspective or metaphysics), a thoughtful moral philosophy, a reconstructed vision of God, an interacting community of interpreters, and an adequate ecosystematic and evolutionary perspective outlining the patterns and processes within this cosmic epoch.

In conclusion, how do we build communities of justice and cross-bearing within rapidly changing environments? William Dean is surely correct when he maintained there is a "distinctly American character of experience," an experience that involves more than proving first principles, or striving for clear and distinct ideas and certain foundations, or merely contemplating a transcendent "Wholly Other" God.[49] It is an experience that seeks to understand relations and values as well as things in themselves, an experience reflected in the imaginative but fertile work of Gordon Kaufman. Such an experience will be sought within a community of interpreters, a community that acknowledges that the process of interpretation within such a community will guide inquiry into a world of both nature and human nature, of both good and evil, of both certainty and ambiguity. Yet sustained by an ever abiding presence of God as Creator-Redeemer-Sustainer-Enabler, we can co-create with God those communities of hope, justice, vision, and relationality such that our lives, and God's, will be truly enriched. The power of each of our lives can be measured in terms of the relationality our lives inspire, and whether they foster in others an appreciative awareness of the depth and richness of an incredibly interwoven human experience, an evolving webwork of centers of experience and creative interaction.[50] This calls for a passionate involvement in ecological affairs, one that Gordon Kaufman certainly has maintained assiduously over the years.

A postmodern world, some outlines of which have been sketched here, will be radically different from the modern mentality we know and tend to cherish. Charles Hartshorne maintained that, "our total response to the past . . . is at the same time our creative contribution to the future."[51] But this calls for an

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[48]Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 392.

[49]W. Dean, *History Making History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988).

[50]Griffin, *God and Religion*, 48.

[51]C. Hartshorne, "An Anglo-American Phenomenology: Method and Some Results," in R.S. Corrington, C. Hausman, and T.M. Seebohm, eds., *Pragmatism Considers Phenomenology* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Advanced Research and

ongoing imaginative vision of how we can best focus the qualities of adventure, zest, truth, beauty, and peace—in a word, love—within our chaotic communities. Creative redemption in our communities requires, certainly, that we can interpret the past and transmute its interwoven texture of good/evil into an increasingly harmonious pattern for all persons. Such creative transformation is often slow, costly, and difficult. Past patterns of oppression, no matter what the context, weigh heavy. Think how difficult it is for any one of us to change our minds concerning the mix of good/evil we observe within our various communities. Should women or gays preach, should creation-science, which I oppose, be taught in our public schools, should that new four-lane highway be built, should we be taxed double so that the three million homeless in our land might find their lives a little more satisfying, should the United States unilaterally disarm its nuclear arsenals, should we forcibly scale back our environmentally degrading life styles thereby enabling our great-grandchildren to have a more humane existence in 2050?

Imaginative visions generated by many different persons serve, I think, to keep our hopes alive, that despite the evils and finitudes of our existence, our communities can be transformed, and that this transformation includes redemptive care for all our environment, human and non-human, living and non-living. There is enormous creative work to do toward becoming living models of God's grace and peace and thus actualizing a concrete and dynamic lure for good, and it has been our good fortune to have Gordon Kaufman in our midst, forcing us to rethink our vision of God in ways more humanizing than the received wisdom could accomplish. Our hope, therefore, is that truly in our time we can see God in Christ reconciling all things unto God (II Cor. 5:19).

Phenomenology and University Press of America, 1987), 63.

Practical Aspects of Constructive Theology

Chapter 8

Mennonite Theology and Historical Consciousness: A Pastoral Perspective

Ted Grimsrud

In *Nonresistance and Responsibility and Other Mennonite Essays* (1979), Gordon Kaufman expresses the need for a theological perspective which would address a population of Mennonites generally left out of most Mennonite theologizing.

He desires "a more liberal and open interpretation of Christian faith and life than customarily appears under Mennonite auspices." The traditional Bible-centered approach, while often illuminating and helpful, "inevitably results in a certain narrowness of perspective on the one hand, and strained interpretations of biblical texts on the other. Narrowness of perspective results because modern experience and life are so utterly different from anything known to—or even imaginable by—the biblical writers, that it is difficult to do full justice to all the complexity and richness and difficulties of our world, when the attempt is made to render these entirely in terms of biblical concepts and categories."

Kaufman continues, "Many persons, I think—especially younger professional people, well educated and living in settings quite far removed, at least culturally, from traditional rural Mennonite communities—feel the need for an interpretation of the Mennonite perspective which breathes more freely the atmosphere of the contemporary life and culture in which they are so deeply involved. They do not wish to give up some of the basic insights and convictions of the faith in which they were raised, but the only interpretations of that faith which are readily accessible do not seem to address the questions and problems they are facing."[1]

Fifteen years later, *Nonresistance and Responsibility* remains one of the few efforts by Mennonite theologians directly to address such an audience ("neo-Mennonites"[2]) in light of experience in

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[1]Gordon Kaufman, *Nonresistance and Responsibility and Other Mennonite Essays* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1979), 7-8.

[2]I am struggling with a short-hand term for the general perspective of which I am referring. I am using "neo-Mennonite" in a non-value-laden way to refer to people who more or less self-consciously affirm at least many of the elements Kaufman refers to above. Other terms I considered and discarded as too value-

the modern world and awareness of the impact of modern thought-forms.

In this essay, I will reflect on some theological themes in light of modern thought-forms from the perspective of one who pastored a "neo-Mennonite"-influenced congregation for seven years. I will consider the writings of four "in-house Mennonite theologians"[3] who have been writing in recent years. I will argue that this "in-house theology" does not directly address the needs of "neo-Mennonites". Finally I will sketch an alternative approach to theology from a perspective more self-consciously geared to "neo-Mennonite" congregations.

I pastored in a "neo-Mennonite"-influenced congregation in the university town of Eugene, Oregon from 1987 to 1994. Based on my experience in Eugene, as well as numerous conversations over the years with "neo-Mennonites" throughout North America, I remain convinced that Gordon Kaufman's intuitions in 1979 were perceptive. Many Mennonites do fit his characterization, and I am aware of little theological writing from explicitly Mennonite sources which directly addresses them.

I am attempting in this essay to be mostly descriptive. I am trying to reflect on a way of thinking which *exists already* in the churches, more than argue that people in the churches *should* think a certain way. My references to in-house theologians focuses primarily on how they might be read in the kind of congregation I was part of, more than serving as a general critique. If I am advocating anything, it is simply that in-house theologians and everyone else should be aware of the ways of thinking characteristic of "neo-Mennonites". That is, these types of thinking are *within* the Mennonite churches and should be respected as legitimate options for Mennonites rather than dismissed as un-Mennonite, too modernistic, or even heretical.[4]

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laden, too vague, or otherwise potentially misleading include: "Muppie," postmodern, universalist, professional, historically-conscious, urban, educated, critical, culturally-open, liberal, and progressive.

[3]By "in-house Mennonite theologians" I simply mean theologians who have been teaching at Mennonite institutions and whose writings mostly have been published under Mennonite auspices. I will be considering Thomas N. Finger, of Eastern Mennonite Seminary; A. James Reimer, of Conrad Grebel College; C. Norman Kraus, retired from Goshen College; and J. Denny Weaver, of Bluffton College.

[4]I appreciate the helpful criticisms and affirmations I have received from the following Mennonite pastors with whom I have discussed this essay: Arthur Boers, Ralph Lind, John A. Miller, and Weldon Nisly.

I. Historical Consciousness

One important element of the contemporary world within which "neo-Mennonites" live and think is "historical consciousness." By this I mean the self-awareness that we are *all* always part of history, and that, consequently, our awareness of meaning, truth, values, and spirituality has a relative cast because we are unable to separate ourselves from this historicity.

Within Christian theology, the emergence of historical consciousness has caused much turmoil. Part of the dynamic has been an attempt by those who resist historical consciousness to continue to do theology as if the traditional "house of authority" of objective, even absolute, authorities such as scripture, church tradition, and church hierarchies still held sway.[5] However, such theology seems inadequate for people who think self-consciously within the context of historical consciousness.

For people who see the world through eyes shaped by historical consciousness, the dogmatic method has little value. That method bases its authority on absolute "facts" existing outside historical relativity. For people who live in the world of historical consciousness, such "facts" simply do not exist.

I believe this immersion in the thought-world shaped by historical consciousness greatly affects the dynamics of "neo-Mennonite" congregations. I will mention only three typical attitudes.

First, one attitude is a denial that outside, objective authorities (e.g., Edward Farley's three-pronged "house of authority": scripture, tradition, church hierarchies) are determinative of belief and practice. In particular, "neo-Mennonites" resist citing such authorities as a means of *ending* discussions. Such citations assume that the absolute "truth" cited resolves any possible disagreement.

Such use of the "way of authority" has often occurred among Mennonites recently with several controversial issues. All three prongs are used among Mennonites, even in spite of our claim not to be a hierarchical church. Certainly *scripture* is cited authoritatively, in particular verses which are said once and for all time to proscribe certain behaviors. However, *tradition* is also a major authority, as in "the Church has always believed this."

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[5]For a description and powerful critique of this three-pronged "house of authority" see Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection: An Anatomy of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

Perhaps even more surprisingly, current church pronouncements (what we could call, in a sense, *church hierarchies*) are also utilized to end discussion.

As Farley argues, such use of authority is doing theology by *citation*, not *inquiry*.[6] Historical consciousness leaves many "neo-Mennonites" quite suspicious of such a method. If *everything* which comes into the heads or out of the mouths or pens of human beings is historically relative, then we have *no* authorities which we can simply cite as an end to theological and ethical conversation.

Again, I am intending to be descriptive here. This hermeneutical principle of suspicion based on the principle of criticism *is* simply part of how many people think. Part of what makes so many church controversies seemingly interminable is the utter lack of weight many "neo-Mennonites" give to citations which people still operating within the way of authority make. These authorities are cited as if they obviously will bring closure to the debate. However, to people who in heart, soul, and mind dwell *outside* the house of authority, they carry no such weight.

A *second* attitude characteristic of many "neo-Mennonite" congregations related to historical consciousness is a much greater interest in issues of spirituality and ethics than classical creeds and dogmas. Life is experienced in the concrete and practical realm—that is, *in history*. Abstract theological constructs are seen to have little relevance to the concrete and practical realm. This is because they mostly emerge from a way of thinking which tries to transcend historical being.

Contemporary use of doctrines such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and the divine inspiration of the Bible do not emerge so much from practical historical life in the present as from *past* constructs which perhaps at one time emerged from practical life. However, by now these have become abstract, ahistorical intellectual constructs which were long ago disconnected from the original ancient controversies and ways of life.

These doctrines may be interesting to think about. And perhaps, with a great deal of work, they can be shown still to relate to actual life. However, for "neo-Mennonites," that is suspect. This is not a rejection of those doctrines so much as skepticism regarding their concrete relevance.

It is difficult for "neo-Mennonites" to see in actual life how belief in the Trinity has made a practical difference. Many

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[6]Farley, *Ecclesial*, 109.

Trinitarian Christians have *supported* imperialistic wars, nuclear weapons systems, economic exploitation of poor people, and sexism. On the other hand, many non-Trinitarian Christians, Jews, even agnostics and atheists have come much closer to following the teachings of Old Testament prophets and Jesus against violence and in favor of care and compassion for the poor and oppressed.

A *third* attitude is an openness to other expressions of faith. If one believes that Christian theological distinctives are historically conditioned; and if spirituality and ethics take priority over abstract, precise, doctrinal theology in determining our faith expression, then one will tend to be much more open to common ground with other expressions of faith. This leads to finding common cause with people of other Christian persuasions, other religious persuasions, and even non-religious persuasions.

It is simply a reality of life in "neo-Mennonite" congregations that little energy is spent on defining how they are different from other religious or even non-religious people. Few "neo-Mennonites" are concerned with converting others to their religion, though they are always happy to have people walk with them should they so choose. Common ground within the congregation is based on a sense of tolerance for different views, similar ethical ideals, an enjoyment of singing, and a respect for traditional Mennonite emphases such as pacifism, service concerns, pot-lucks, and quilting projects.

In the context of these various characteristics, "neo-Mennonite" congregations do find a way to facilitate a meaningful expression of faith. Historical consciousness does not lead to total relativism or individualism. These congregations still come together, many people show great commitment of time and finances to keep these congregations going. Worship, a sense of community, encouragement for ethically faithful living, do not require residence within the house of authority.

One of the problems, though, for "neo-Mennonite" congregations, is the difficulty in articulating a *positive* expression of belief. Many people in such congregations operate within the thought-world of historical consciousness. For them, the old way of authority is untenable as a means to express their beliefs. That is a loss little mourned. With all its tensions and even pain, Christian living within the modern thought-world is possible, even exhilarating. The question is not whether "neo-Mennonites" can be Christians outside the house of authority. "Neo-Mennonite" congregations show that they can. But they do suffer from not having a widely understood and expressed theological

language which might help them better to make sense out of their Christian experience.

This problem is by no means unique to Mennonite circles. Robert Bellah and his co-researchers argue that the difficulty in constructing a meaningful moral and religious language appropriate for life in our contemporary culture is widespread—and has potentially dangerous consequences. Our moral practices might well wither as we lose the capability of understanding and describing their bases and how they fit with our understanding of the world and our place in it.[7]

For people who live in the thought-world of historical consciousness, a moral-theological language based on the house of authority will not be viable. However, that does not mean that *no* language is possible. Nor does it make the construction of such a language less crucial.

The challenge Kaufman made in publishing his "Mennonite essays," to articulate a "more liberal and open interpretation of Christian faith" which speaks to Mennonites, largely remains to be met. "Neo-Mennonites" have much work to do in constructing a viable theology. The theological work now being done under Mennonite auspices does not generally directly address their needs. To support that claim, I will now turn to a brief examination of the work of some representative in-house Mennonite theologians.

II. In-house Perspectives

For a "neo-Mennonite" congregational setting, deeply influenced (consciously and unconsciously) by historical consciousness, these are some of the key theological issues: (1) How do we characterize life? More in terms of "abundance" or "scarcity"? (2) What is the nature of theology? More "construction" or "citation"? (3) How do we approach the Bible? More as a "dialogue partner" or as an "authority"?

I will briefly mention some perspectives of several contemporary in-house Mennonite theologians in relation to these questions. Then I will offer a critique and sketch an alternative perspective.

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[7]Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

A. James Reimer.

(1) How do we characterize life? For Reimer, the present world is an unfriendly place for genuine Christianity. Two "phenomena combined—the conflicting diversity of theological options . . . and the absolutizing technological monolith" greatly hinder "any faith in and experience of that which is eternal and transcendent."[8]

He denies that genuine meaningfulness can emerge from historical relativities. "If humankind's knowledge is radically historical, how can one speak of truth and knowledge at all, how can one speak of universal norms by which the relativities of human history can be judged?"[9]

(2) What is the character of theology? Theology ultimately has to do with accurately representing the absolute truthfulness revealed in the Bible and early creeds. Reimer rejects the notion of *our* constructing our theology anew in the modern world. "Rather than deliberately setting out to 'construct' a new concept of God on the basis of modern historicism, it seems that we ought to recover the profundity of the classical trinitarian view and put fresh meaning into it in the context of our age."[10]

Reimer emphasizes that the trinitarian conception of God corresponds with the eternal realm, as does the deity of Christ. Because of this correspondence, these doctrines are not relativized by history, but remain objectively true. Hence, our job is, essentially, finding meaningful ways to cite these once-for-all-time, outside of history, truths. "A trinitarian understanding of God and his ways with the world is more than simply an approach; it is in some sense the content of truth itself."[11]

(3) How do we approach the Bible? Reimer is suspicious of attempts to synthesize the biblical materials with present-day life and thought. We need "jealously [to] guard the distance between the biblical world and the contemporary world."[12] Otherwise we will have no transcendent authority.

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[8]A. James Reimer, "Toward Christian Theology From a Diversity of Mennonite Perspectives," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 6 (1988), 149.

[9]A. James Reimer, "The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1 (1983), 33.

[10]Ibid., 34-35.

[11]A. James Reimer, "Response to Glenn Brubacher," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 5 (Winter 1987), 73.

[12]A. James Reimer, "Biblical and Systematic Theology as Functional Specialities: Their Distinction and Relation," in Ben C. Ollenburger, ed., *So Wide a Sea: Essays on Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1991), 50-51.

"The underlying affirmations embedded in the church's confessions, doctrines, creeds, and dogmas assert something fundamental (call it ontological, metaphysical, whatever you like) about God."[13] Ultimately these are truths before which we must bow in submission.

Thomas N. Finger.

(1) How do we characterize life? A central theme in Finger's theology is a future-oriented eschatology. The present world is the location of continuing evil. The continued existence of evil is evidence that God's kingdom is not yet completed. "To me, evil is still appallingly real and active enough that I cannot see how Jesus' return can manifest the reality of his prior victory unless that evil is also somehow destroyed."[14] The implications of Finger's argument are that when the present, with its continued manifestation of evil, is compared to the promised and assured completed kingdom, it can only be seen as incomplete, less than desirable, characterized by scarcity.

Finger also resists historical consciousness. The New Testament, according to Finger, goes beyond history in establishing Jesus' identity. The transcendent/ eternal realm, outside of history, is ultimately more real and determinative of Jesus' identity. This eternal realm is where God resides, and it is from this realm that absolute truths are revealed in the context of human history.[15]

(2) What is the nature of theology? Finger attempts to do systematic theology primarily as reporting on biblical truths. He certainly recognizes the need to communicate in the language of the modern world. However, Christian theology is essentially a matter of interpretation of past, once-for-all-time revealed truth.

"Theology's critical and constructive norms cannot be derived simply from [the communities it represents], their histories and their practices, but only from truth claims which it believes transcend and critique all human communities whatsoever."[16]

(3) How do we approach the Bible? "The biblical writers express a unique perspective on reality—one that will undergo distortion

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[13]Ibid., 53.

[14]Thomas N. Finger, "Response to J. Denny Weaver," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 6.2 (Spring 1988), 163; see also Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 152.

[15]Thomas N. Finger, "Is 'Systematic Theology' Possible from a Mennonite Perspective?," in Willard M. Swartley, ed., *Explorations of Systematic Theology: From Mennonite Perspectives* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 46.

[16]Finger, "Response to Weaver," 164.

if subordinated to, or reinterpreted in terms of, other language games."[17]

The authoritative Bible is our absolute norm. This is necessary for theology which truly speaks of ultimate reality and meets human spiritual needs. "To distinguish between the ephemeral and the permanent, between the misleading and the trustworthy in experience, theology requires a *norm* by which to test it. How can Jesus and the kingdom be apprehended so that we might test our implicit convictions and our contemporary language about them? To apprehend them with any concreteness, scripture is our only norm."[18]

C. Norman Kraus.

(1) How do we characterize life? In his understanding of human nature, Kraus makes two assertions. One is the significance of our being created in God's image, creatures hence with the potential for relating personally with God. The second is our inability in our present state fully to realize that potential. For Kraus, the present world is both a place loved by God and a place in need of transformation.[19]

(2) What is the character of theology? Kraus strongly emphasizes the need to do theology *within* history. "A disciples' theology must have a specific location in time and space . . . .[We] should [not] expect our statements of truth to be timeless. This does not mean that ultimate reality changes, but only that our partial knowledge and experience of it changes. Theology is inevitably tied to our experience of reality."[20]

Theology, for Kraus, is not simply interpreting past materials. Nor is it primarily abstract intellectualizing or speculating about the future. "Theology should describe and point to a *present reality* and not *present theory, past experience, or eschatological prediction.*"[21] Kraus has little interest in abstract speculation, opting instead for reflection which relates to communal Christian living. "Theology should be a functional discipline in the life of

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[17]Thomas N. Finger, "Biblical and Systematic Theology in Interaction: A Case Study on Atonement," in Ben C. Ollenburger, ed., *So Wide a Sea: Essays on Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1991), 4.

[18]Finger, "Is 'Systematic Theology' Possible?," 46.

[19]C. Norman Kraus, *God Our Savior: Theology in a Christological Mode* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1991), 102-130.

[20]C. Norman Kraus, "Toward a Theology for the Disciple Community," in J. R. Burkholder and Calvin Redekop, eds., *Kingdom, Cross, and Community: Essays on Mennonite Themes in Honor of Guy F. Hershberger* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1976), 114-115.

[21]Ibid., 114. (Kraus's italics)

the congregation. There is little value, for example, in rational speculation about the essential nature of the Godhead, which in any event must of necessity remain mystery."[22]

(3) How do we approach the Bible? For Kraus, the Bible is the core material for doing theology. He does emphasize the Bible *as interpreted* more than the Bible as an objective, outside-of-us absolute norm.

"I consider systematic theology to be essentially a hermeneutical discipline, not a speculative one. This means that one begins with the biblical text as the basic document and attempts to transpose it into a new cultural context."[23] This centrality of the Bible as source remains true everywhere. "In crossing cultures with the gospel we must adhere radically to the *sola Scriptura* principle."[24]

In placing highest priority on a pre-creedal reading of the Bible, Kraus places the strongest emphasis on the story of Jesus as the key for understanding the whole. "I think that theology as a hermeneutical discipline should begin with the definitive self-revelation of God in Christ as it has come to us in the biblical tradition."[25]

J. Denny Weaver

(1) How do we characterize life? On the one hand, Weaver strongly emphasizes the possibilities of faithfulness to God's will in the *present.* Life in the here and now is the locus for meaningful, ethically fruitful living. "We should take seriously the world and its history as God's arena."[26]

On the other hand, the here and now is also the locus of a major confrontation between two worlds, that of God's mercy and love as expressed in Jesus and his followers, and that of the forces of hostility to God's mercy. "The church is a sign and a witness to the world that the kingdom of God is different from

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[22]Ibid.

[23]Kraus, "Reply to Interpretations and Criticisms," in Richard A. Kauffman, ed., *A Disciple's Christology: Appraisals of Kraus's Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1989), 77-78.

[24]C. Norman Kraus, "Response to Thomas N. Finger," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 8 (Spring 1990), 209.

[25]Kraus, "Reply to Interpretations," 78.

[26]J. Denny Weaver, "Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 2 (Fall 1984), 194.

the world. The church lives with the goal of transforming all of society into the kingdom of God."[27]

(2) What is the character of theology? Weaver's theology is the most radically Jesus-centered orientation of these four theologians. "It is the story of Jesus—and not the Bible or theocentrism or trinitarianism—which Christian faith claims as the particular point in history which reveals God's presence and will most fully."[28]

(3) How do we approach the Bible? For Weaver, the Bible very much plays the authoritative role, specifically the Bible as witness to Jesus. "Jesus or the Jesus story is the regulative principle for a Mennonite systematic theology . . . . To be Christian is to take Jesus . . . as the norm and the beginning point for theology."[29]

The Bible retains central significance for contemporary theology, and contemporary theology faces the challenge of interpreting the biblical message anew in the context of our modern world. "The Bible . . . contains the narratives with which any christology must begin and with which any christology must be compatible, and it also has a number of examples of the development of christologies. It is thus indispensable. At the same time, awareness of the worldviews depicted in it means that no modern theology can limit its vocabulary or its images to the biblical languages and images. Even less can theological language and images begin with or be limited to or require compatibility with the fourth and fifth century creedal formulations."[30]

III. Response

Reimer and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Finger most strongly express theological perspectives in tension with emphases of "neo-Mennonite" perspectives which self-consciously affirm historical consciousness. However, Kraus and Weaver also stand in tension with such perspectives in key ways.

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[27]J. Denny Weaver, "Response to Walter Klaassen," in Leo Driedger and Leland Harder, eds., *Anabaptist-Mennonite Identities in Ferment* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1990), 30.

[28]J. Denny Weaver, "Mennonites: Theology, Peace, and Identity," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 6 (1988), 127.

[29]Weaver, "Mennonite Theological Self-Understanding: A Reply to A. James Reimer," in Calvin Redekop, ed., *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1988), 55.

[30]Weaver, "Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology," 198-199.

(1) How do we characterize life? The general, overall perspective of these four theologians is that life in the here-and-now world is essentially characterized by scarcity more than abundance.

One of the ways this is most clearly expressed is in negative language about "the world." Reimer articulates this the most strongly.[31] He seems to accept an Augustinian/Hobbesian notion of the nature of human reality being dog-eat-dog. We are in competition to prove the truth. But is that really the way things are? Do we need to arbitrate *between* competing systems as if they were mutually exclusive? Might we not better think of learning from all and working together to learn better? Might not attitudes of competition actually *undercut* spiritual growth?[32]

This negative perspective also is expressed in Reimer's antipathy toward what he calls "historicism," an antipathy essentially shared by Finger. God's ultimate reality is located *outside* history. The here-and-now, thus, is secondary, transient, suspect. Genuine abundance is not to found in everyday human life but must come from the outside, which is where the divine realm is located.

Reimer's negative attitude toward the human reality also finds expression in his perceiving in God a dark, wrathful, judgmental side. Finger, in emphasizing the centrality of evil in the present in contrast to future, eschatological paradise, also reflects a negative attitude toward present human reality. Finger's eschatological focus implicitly minimizes the *present* possibility for human experience of abundance.

Kraus and Weaver, in positing discipleship as more central in their theology reflect more optimism about the possibilities of present life. We may also see this in each expressing a much more positive view of the *historical* locus of God's salvific work.

Nonetheless, both qualify their positive attitudes toward present life in significant ways. Kraus emphasizes our need for Jesus' intervention in order for us to live in God's presence. "He accomplished for us what we could not do for ourselves."[33] Weaver uses the language of church versus world as a way to

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[31]Reimer, "Biblical and Systematic Theology as Functional Specialities," 53.

[32]From a non-theological perspective, see two books by Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1986) and *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

[33]Kraus, "Jesus Christ, the Servant-King," in Dieter Götz Lichdi, ed., *Mennonite World Handbook: Mennonites in Global Witness* (Carol Stream: Mennonite World Conference, 1990), 184.

minimize present possibilities for abundance and points toward the *future* for the full manifestation of human possibilities.

These emphases on the need for *outside* intervention; on the need for *future*, eschatological fulfillment of God's purposes; on a clear categorization of the "world" as *not* the place of God's expressions of abundance, all reflect a more negative attitude toward *present* life than many "neo-Mennonites" have.

A perspective affirmative of historical consciousness tends *not* to understand God to be outside of human history, tends *not* to think of an apocalyptic future as the locus for the fulfillment of human possibilities, and tends *not* to divide present human existence between a place called "world" and another place distinct from "world."

(2) What is the character of theology? For all four theologians, again recognizing different emphases, theology often has more the character of citation than construction. The main content for theology comes from the past, and the present-day theologian has the job of interpreting, perhaps even translating, that ancient body of material into present-day usefulness. Reimer especially emphasizes the early church's creeds and confessions, Finger the entire biblical corpus, and Kraus and Weaver the accounts of Jesus.

All would agree, though, that theology is "essentially a hermeneutical discipline" in which classical texts are interpreted for the present.[34] The role of theology is to interpret pre-existing truths more than constructing *new* understandings.

The approach essentially is deductive, not inductive. Edward Farley's characterization fits, to some extent at least, the basic approach of all four theologians. "Theological judgments (and contents) themselves are established not by demonstration but by citation, by appeal to authority. Classical theological thinking occurs not in the mode of science but in the mode of authority. The theologian relates to the location of divine-human identity not by *inquiry* but by *exposition*."[35]

Theology by citation places the issue of normativity at the center. However, for "neo-Mennonites," part of the problem with telling people what they *should* believe (especially if this belief requires anachronistic or foreign thought-forms) is that even when they assent to the "should," what likely results is mystification (making affirmations which are not fully understood and often do not connect with life) and *ressentiment* (internalizing

[34]Kraus, "Reply to Interpretations," 77.
[35]Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection*, 116, 117, 112.

extrinsic values resulting in deep-seated antipathy towards actual reality)[36].

Even though Finger and, especially, Reimer, align their theological construct with "classical Christianity," in actuality they seem, from the perspective of "neo-Mennonites," to be claiming special authority for what is every bit as much a late twentieth-century formulation as the "relativistic historicisms" of someone such as Gordon Kaufman. For "neo-Mennonite" theology, *no* formulation of theology can help but be a contemporary construct no matter how much old language is used. *None* of us can transcend *our* location in *our* day and age.

Behind much of the desire to find outside authorities on which to base theology is a desire to avoid "anthropocentrism." However, a "neo-Mennonite" perspective might argue that because we are limited to *human* language in articulating our theology, our theology is in some sense *by definition* anthropocentric. The question is not how can we escape this but how do we think *within* our limits, which relativize *all* theological constructs. Then, we must ask what values our constructs are serving—those which enhance humaneness and creativity or those which enhance hierarchies and the status quo.

(3) Bible as authority, not dialogue partner. Finger requires "truth claims which transcend and critique all human communities."[37] Reimer is also concerned with absolutes which tell us which truth claim is correct.

In contrast to these appeals to outside authority, Daniel Liechty (a "neo-Mennonite" theologian) speaks from a point of view within historical consciousness when he speaks of authority. In introducing his book, *Theology in Postliberal Perspective*, he writes, "The question of authority in theological writing is with me at every point in this presentation. Authority, authorship, the author. I have finally come to the conclusion that authority must reside with the author."[38] Liechty proposes that the central authority we may appeal to is that of our own argument, not something outside of us which provides coercive force to buttress our assertions.

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[36]Cf. James Breech's penetrating discussion of *ressentiment* in *The Silence of Jesus: The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), utilizing insights of Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler.

[37]Finger, "Response to J. Denny Weaver," 164.

[38]Daniel Liechty, *Theology in Postliberal Perspective* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), ix.

This contrasts with Reimer's claim that his view of God is more than "an approach," but corresponds with Reality.[39] This latter view is not comprehensible for one who self-consciously thinks in terms of historical consciousness. For historical consciousness, all reality is filtered through human perspective to such a degree that we simply can not speak of reality as Reality.

Kraus and Weaver do not make quite the same exalted claims regarding biblical authority. They both clearly argue for seeing the biblical materials as *historical*. However, the centrality they place on the Jesus story reflects a viewpoint that still requires some sort of transcendent authority.

IV. Sketching a "Neo-Mennonite" Alternative

As I understand key aspects of "neo-Mennonite" thinking, this is how I believe a "neo-Mennonite" alternative might begin in constructing an different theology.

(1) World as abundant.[40] An attitude of trust toward life in the concrete world as created by God is characteristic of theology which accepts the reality of historical consciousness. This kind of theology can affirm God *without* positing "Classical" notions of Transcendence, Eternity, and Ontology. This is a choice for one understanding of present *particular* "metaphysics" over other

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[39]What he actually writes is that "a trinitarian understanding of God and his ways with the world is more than simply an approach; it is in some sense the content of truth itself." Reimer, "Response to Glen Brubacher," 74.

[40]I am using the term "abundant" of the world here based in part on the distinction between "abundance" and "scarcity" made by Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life: Wisdom for Work, Creativity and Caring* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 124-125: "The quality of our active lives depends heavily on whether we assume a world of scarcity or a world of abundance. Do we inhabit a universe where the basic things that people need from food and shelter to a sense of competence and of being loved are ample in nature? Or it this a universe where such goods are in short supply, available only to those who have the power to beat everyone else to the store? The nature of our action will be heavily conditioned by the way we answer those bedrock questions. In a universe of scarcity, only people who know the arts of competing, even of making war, will be able to survive. But in a universe of abundance, acts of generosity and community become not only possible but fruitful as well."

By "world," I mean the realm of creation, our present historical existence. In this sense, "world" has *positive* moral connotations: that which is loved by God, which is the place where human beings encounter God. This is not to deny that there is also a sense in which "world" can be used with negative moral connotations: that realm of existence which is in rebellion against God. The Gospel of John reflects both usages: John 3:16 the positive sense and John 1:10 the negative sense.

possible *particular* "metaphysics," including those such as Reimer's which claim Authority.

Two contemporary Mennonite theologians, Gordon Kaufman and Daniel Liechty recognize that the central criterion for *our* theology is that it be meaningful for *us*, that it address *our* reality in terms which we understand and can relate to. Scripture and creeds must serve *this* criterion or we engage in mystification.

The best "governor" for theology is *not* some external authority—even the "Bible" or "God." These types of things do not prevent differences and they invest those differences with "absolute" authority, leading to violence. The best "governor," rather, is the on-going, ever-evolving quest for *truth*. If we are seeking the truth, we will be open to the validity of arguments and will be willing to adjust our viewpoints accordingly. Doing theology then becomes a process of working *together* better to understand rather than working *against* each other to win arguments and/or defend our ideology. Seeking truth fits well with a *trust* in Reality/God which does not need us to *fight* for it or coerce others on its behalf.

A basic issue is whether we believe God (and, hence, life) is trustworthy or not. If we do, then we will not feel the anxiety to "change the world"/"protect the truth" that seems to characterize "in-house" Mennonite theologians. We will focus more on understanding/respecting/listening to what is than on changing/fearing/confronting.[41]

This all relates to our anthropology. Most violence is the *result of* a negative anthropology, not *evidence for* such a view. A positive anthropology is based on (1) a doctrine of creation as good; (2) a doctrine of providence, including concrete expressions of God's involvement in human history (e.g., the exodus, Jesus, the Prophets); and (3) an awareness of human responsiveness to love.

Martin Buber articulates the anthropological perspective I have in mind as profoundly as anyone I know of. He affirms the human being and he affirms the world in which we live as where we will encounter God. "I know nothing of a 'world' and of

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[41]Cf. this theme of patience in the theological ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr, e.g., *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1963). For Niebuhr in this book, "responsible" is used essentially as a synonym to "responsive," i.e., responsive to God's presence in the world. A more recent book advocating patience as a crucial virtue is Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1992).

'worldly life' that separate us from God. What is designated that way is life with an alienated It-world, the life of experience and use. Whoever goes forth in truth to the world, goes forth to God. Only he that believes in the world achieves contact with it; and if he commits himself he cannot remain godless. Let us love that actual world that never wishes to be annulled, but love it in all its terror, but dare to embrace it with our spirit's arms—and our hands encounter the hands that hold it."[42]

(2) Theology as Construction. Basically, I am arguing that "neo-Mennonite" theology is an *inductive* theology, which flows out of *our* experience in life and is expressed in *our* language.[43] This is in practice what we all do anyhow. Attempts to do theology *deductively* (traditional orthodoxy) often result in mystification due to the gap between archaic religious language and *our* actual experience and what actually in practice provides meaning in our lives.

"Neo-Mennonite" theology remains committed to Anabaptist/Mennonite distinctives. In fact, many of these distinctives fit better with this approach to theology than an approach remaining within the house of authority. The construction of "neo-Mennonite" theology includes a *positive attitude toward the world,* which is consistent with Anabaptist/Mennonite pacifism (it is possible in life to live consistently in non-coercive love) and adult baptism (infants are *not* born condemned to Hell needing sacramental intervention). This theology is *dialogical,* consistent with the Anabaptist/Mennonite emphasis on community. It is *concrete in* history, consistent with the Anabaptist/Mennonite low-church worship patterns which emphasize human immediacy more than sacramentalism.

This construction takes place in conversation with the Bible. Each affirmation can and should utilize biblical motifs and images because the Bible has a special connection with life and because the Bible provides a common language. However, these are only

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[42]Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribners, 1970), 143.

[43]This kind of theology is not objective, authoritative, foundational. However, it is also not relativ*istic.* It hopes to speak to something which is real and exists outside individual whims and subjectivities. Many modern-day philosophers and theologians have struggled with finding a way which goes "beyond objectivism and relativism." One of the more successful has been Richard J. Bernstein, in, among other books, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

elements (at times *minority* elements) of our construal. Bible is a conversation partner which helps *our* construction, which emerges through *our* experience. Bible is not an authority-over but a source of language which must always merge with our horizon in ever-evolving ways.

To say *our* theology must be done in terms of *our* thought-forms is mostly a *descriptive* statement. We cannot do theology otherwise. What I would *call* for is honesty and self-awareness about what we in actuality cannot help but do. Trying to think "Classically" (Reimer) and "biblically" (Weaver, Kraus, Finger) is at most finding sources (creeds and confessions, Bible, story of Jesus) which provide language and ideas which we use to make sense of our world. When these sources become an alternative to paying attention to life in the present, they primarily heighten our lack of perception of God's presence in *our* world.

(3) "Authorities" are Dialogue Partners. The in-house theologians claim too much for the Bible. This over-claim contributes to many thoughtful "neo-Mennonites" distancing themselves from the Bible altogether. They have been taught authoritarian hermeneutics as the only approach. When that proves unhelpful, the Bible itself is jettisoned. What is needed among "neo-Mennonites" is a constructive, non-authoritarian biblical hermeneutic which allows them to utilize the Bible in a way which connects with their lives.

"Neo-Mennonite" theology rejects fearfulness toward the actual world. Kaufman and Liechty are helpful in showing how to do this. However, a theology which will be genuinely "congregational" has a great deal to gain by turning back to the Jesus story more than Kaufman and Liechty do, reading it and its broader biblical context non-fearfully and non-foundationally. In that story we find useful content: God's compassion, the "divinity" of everyday life, the rejection of conventional wisdom and power politics, abundance over scarcity, etc.[44] We need to return to the Bible *via* historical consciousness. Much excellent work already exists to point the way.[45]

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[44]Cf. Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (Harper and Row, 1987).

[45]A brief list: Numerous books by Walter Brueggemann, including, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Fortress, 1991); *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Fortress, 1988); *Old Testament Theology: Approaches to Structure, Theme, and Text* (Fortress, 1992); and *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress, 1978); Douglas W. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Eerdmans, 1987); Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (Yale, 1988); Herbert Schneidau, *Sacred*

Reading the Bible together as a witness to openness to God and life provides a way to converse together. Is the biblical story, especially regarding Jesus, *in itself* authoritative enough or do we need external claims to buttress that (e.g., doctrines of inspiration; an absolute, transcendent God; church hierarchy)? Is the awareness of the truthfulness of biblical stories arrived at inductively or deductively? Do we connect with the Bible through our experience of life/self-awareness or through submission to external authorities/doctrines/creeds which tell us what the Bible must be?

Jesus and Paul (and Old Testament prophets) themselves embody the power of personal self-awareness and direct awareness of God. They tapped into a reality which is also fully accessible to us when we listen first to God via our own hearts, as taking priority over our conventional wisdom and received theological method.[46]

Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition (California, 1976); Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Fortress, 1992).

[46]Along with the Mennonite pastors I mention in footnote four above, I would like to thank several other friends for helpful discussions on these issues: Steve Baker, Steve Bilijnsky, Lawrence Braul, Hank Dizney, Mark Keim, David Myers, Kathleen Temple, J. Denny Weaver, Alain Epp Weaver, and Lamar Witmer.

Chapter 9

"Nonresistance and Responsibility": A Review and an Assessment

Ted Koontz

In this essay I have chosen to focus on that aspect of Gordon Kaufman's work which has contributed most directly to Mennonite discussions of peace theology, and which bears directly on Mennonite shifts in light of our increasing immersion in "modernity." Kaufman's contribution in this area was written at a time when he was closely involved in Mennonite theological discussions, and it was written specifically to Mennonites, unlike most of his later work.

The significance of Kaufman as a theological "broker" for Mennonite peace theology was noted in a recent book on *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* by Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill.[1] They highlight him as one of four central theologians who during the 1950s helped articulate and rationalize the shift which their subtitle identifies. The shift and the subtitle could just as well be "From Nonresistance to Responsibility," using the key terms which appear in Kaufman's essay of 1958.[2] To what extent Kaufman contributed to the shift, as compared to articulating a rationale for shifts already underway, and to what extent the shift has gone, or should go, in just the directions Kaufman pointed to, can be debated. Nevertheless, Kaufman's essay sounded some central themes which at that time were quite new and which have reverberated loudly in subsequent Mennonite peace theology, even when Kaufman is not referred to explicitly.

The central theme of Kaufman's essay is his challenge to a key assumption of traditional Christian thinking—an assumption held by Mennonite and non-Mennonite, pacifist and non-pacifist alike. This assumption, that "an ethic of nonresistant love leads inevitably to withdrawal from and failure to take responsibility for the social order" (63), is, more than anything else, what Kaufman seeks to refute in this essay. A good deal of Mennonite, and more broadly pacifist, thinking has been at pains to refute this assumption in the decades since Kaufman wrote, while many critics of pacifists have been anxious to substantiate it. In

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[1](Scottdale: Herald Press, 1994).

[2]Gordon Kaufman, "Nonresistance and Responsibility," *Concern, A Pamphlet Series for Christian Renewal* 6 (1958): 5-29.

addition, I think there is no other single issue on which there has been more sweeping change among North American Mennonites, both in thinking and in living. We *have* become far less withdrawn.[3] This change may be less dramatic on the issue of "taking responsibility" for the social order than on the issue of outgrowing "withdrawal" in other ways which are less directly problematic for Mennonite pacifists. Nevertheless, the changes in all respects are far-reaching and striking. For good or for ill, the kind of challenge to traditional ways of thinking and acting which Kaufman articulated has found much resonance.

In this essay I, first, reconstruct his argument; second, reflect on the way themes in his essay have been treated, both in life and thought in the years since he wrote; and third, raise some questions about the directions his essay points us. Those familiar with his essay may wish to skip over the substantial descriptive section which follows.

I. Kaufman's Argument

Why should the old assumption that nonresistant love must lead to withdrawal, and the converse assumption, that involvement will require action contradictory to nonresistant love, be rejected? Kaufman argues that to accept this assumption is to say that Christian ethics (centered on the norm of love) are removed from society's deepest problems, irrelevant to them. It is to create the need to look for non-Christian (or not specifically Christian) sources for ethics, such as natural law, or to downplay the radicalness of Jesus' ethic by, for example, focusing on his eschatology. There are a variety of alternatives for creating a "relevant" (and thus not nonresistant) ethic but, Kaufman notes, "all such positions suffer the theological embarrassment of not being based clearly in the Christian revelation" (64). This is an "embarrassment" which Mennonites have rightly sought to avoid in sticking to nonresistance.

At the same time, however, Kaufman argues that the withdrawal which nonresistance is seen to require is equally

[3]That is, what are sometimes (arrogantly) called the "mainstream" of North American Mennonites have become less withdrawn. To what extent this can be said of the large conservative parts of the Mennonite/Amish family I leave to others to judge. When I speak of "Mennonites" in this essay I refer to North American Mennonites, and to those closely affiliated to the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, not to all Mennonites. From this point on in this essay these qualifiers will be omitted for sake of simplicity.

embarrassing, for withdrawal negates the character or meaning of love. "Love is precisely that which goes into the very heart of an evil situation and attempts to rectify it. . . . Love goes to the very heart of the most sinful situations that it can find, and there it gives itself without any reservation whatsoever. This is the absurdity of the Christian ethic; it is an ethic of radical imprudence" (65).

Mennonites have seen power struggles as the most sinful places, and have withdrawn from them for that reason. But precisely in their withdrawing they have failed to do exactly what they said they wanted to do—love. Instead of withdrawing, Kaufman insists, love "rushes in trying to act redemptively" (66). We have seen one side of the problem and missed the other. By withdrawing we have failed to love.

There can be no question that love requires us to take some sort of responsibility for society, Kaufman claims. This responsibility is not derived most deeply from the natural connections we have with people, but "more directly and decisively from God's action as Redeemer. . . . Our responsibility for our brother in all aspects of his being derives from the necessity of our being responsive to God's love and mercy towards us. Conversely, it is not possible to respond to God's love or be obedient to his demand without taking responsibility for our brother" (66).[4] The crucial question about responsibility is not whether we have a responsibility for society, Kaufman argues, but "what . . . the nature of that responsibility" (66) is.

He suggests that there are three aspects of responsibility born of love. The first is "our evangelistic or missionary responsibility: our responsibility to preach the gospel" (67). In discussing this first aspect he notes that it is important to testify to the gospel, but he stresses especially the centrality of *incarnating* it, of coming close to those to whom we witness, entering their life situations, not preaching at them from a distance, and not manipulating them or coercing them. "The first and primary thing that is required of me, if I am to act in love, is not that I try to impose myself or my ideas on the other as though I were God with absolute truth in my hand, but that I accept the other as a person, as one who has his own integrity in his own right. Above all else I must not violate or lead him to violate his own convictions" (68). This means not condemning the other, but accepting him,

[4]I have not changed the sexist language in the original. The essay was written well before awareness of this matter was widespread.

seeking to sympathetically understand "his situation as he himself understands it" (68).

"The second aspect, then—though first in order of importance—of our love for our neighbor is the acceptance of him as a person" (69). This is consistent with our tradition on religious liberty, and should be self-evident, but it has hard implications, Kaufman contends. It means we can not preach that we have the true faith, all others notwithstanding. It means we must first listen and help others see the implications of their own faith. Kaufman notes that most pacifists would do this in counseling a young man who came for assistance in deciding about military service—they would help him come to "a clearer and deeper understanding of what his own convictions already are and what the implications of those convictions might be." At the same time, most would "try to explain their own understandings of the implications of Christian faith on the issue of war, and would try to help him see why they think a pacifist position is required of a Christian. *But surely no one has the right to say to the other: this is what you must decide; this is God's will for you.* . . . To do so is to attempt to dominate the other—the very reversal of love. . . . To do so is to forget that 'Christian discipleship is a matter of individual calling and response' and therefore we should 'not expect Christian ethics of the non-Christian'" (70).[5]

Kaufman points out that this logic has implications for our dealings with societies as well as individuals, for societies are also guided by their moral insights and commitments. They are moral entities and ought to be treated as free and responsible agents. Our attitude toward our societies should be "analogous to our attitude toward a fellow man who has come to us for counsel. Before preaching fiery denunciations . . . we must lovingly and sympathetically attempt to *accept* what is before us in all its sinfulness" (71). We must not impose our will here any more than we would on someone who we truly love, but rather help society come to its own clear understanding of its values and their implications. For example, we must not simply witness against every military bill, though that is part of our witness. Because we know non-Christians won't act as Christians, it is folly to expect society to demilitarize completely. "We ought, therefore, to be

[5]In this last sentence Kaufman is quoting John H. Yoder in "The Anabaptist Dissent: The Logic and Place of the Disciple in Society," *Concern, A Pamphlet Series for Christian Renewal* 1 (1958). Unless otherwise noted, emphases in quotes from Kaufman are also in the original.

prepared, along with our negative witness, to *support* the military bill most in accord with the highest and best moral insights of the total American society." Kaufman notes that most Americans don't believe in defenselessness. "To demand that they act as if they did is not only folly, it is positively immoral; for this is to demand that others in our nation live by our faith, our understanding of the will of God, rather than their own." If we are to love genuinely *"we must concern ourselves with attempting to help our nation come to a deeper understanding of her own faith, her own convictions, the moral insights which are the context in terms of which she lives and acts. And we must attempt to help her come to a decision and work out a course of action in terms of her faith, rather than our own, however much we might desire her to follow what we believe to be the right.* This of course does not mean that our obligation to witness to God's requirement of nonresistant love is in any wise eliminated or even diminished. . . . [Yet] any other course than this in the case of the nation of which we are a part—just as in the case of an individual friend—is motivated not so much by real self-giving love as by the desire to dominate and impose our will, the precise opposite of love" (71-72).

The third aspect of responsibility that Kaufman describes is "the most difficult and paradoxical of all. If we truly love the other, we cannot forsake him even when he decides in a way which we take to be wrong and sinful; we must continue to love him as a person and attempt to help him live up to his own insights even when those insights contradict ours. . . . Again God's love must be our model." (72) God does not forsake us when we sin, but seeks to redeem the offender. "We cannot, then, forsake the one who has decided in a manner which we think to be wrong. We must in fact seek to uphold him in his own convictions, even while we are trying to help him come to deeper insight into the implications of the gospel" (73). This does not mean we should support everything the other does, for much is done from selfishness or lack of concern. But "when we are convinced that the other is acting in accordance with the deepest insights of his conscience, we must support and encourage him in that action. . . . When my friend, then, concludes that it is his Christian duty to join the army, I have no right . . . in any way to hinder him. . . . Nor is it enough merely to refrain from hindering him. As one who loves his brother, I must do all I can to help and support him in his resolution" (73).

Again Kaufman points out that there are implications of this view for our relationship with whole societies as well as with individuals. Our society is not Mennonite-Christian and cannot be

expected to follow policies growing out of Mennonite convictions. But love does not allow us to withdraw, nor does it allow us to simply "witness" to our faith. It asks us to "enter into the situation" and support our society's best decision. To do other would be to expect it to go against its best knowledge, "to violate its own conscience. . . . As Christians, then, we have no right to withdraw from even the most horribly unchristian (as it seems to us) decisions which our nation finds itself facing, and we have no right to withdraw from support of the course of action to which it is led, if that action is accord with the nation's best insights. . . . This will involve our participating in the actual formulation of policy, for without such participation, our help is only abstract and unreal" (74).

Kaufman finds yet another step in following the logic of loving responsibility to its conclusion. "Having aided in the formulation of policy, we must not shy away from also helping to implement it" (74). This means helping to implement any policies which represent the best courses of action the nation is morally capable of, "and these will include many things with which we disagree, such as, no doubt, a large defense budget. The kind of participation and support which is here envisaged may well require running for Congress and voting 'yes' on bills which personally violate one's own convictions" (74). This support may also "require holding office in the State Department (or even the Defense Department), if in such capacity one can really aid one's nation in acting as morally as it is possible for it to act. It does not allow withdrawal from any level of political responsibility simply to keep one's own hands clean, if it is clear that through acting in that position we might help our fellow Americans somehow more nearly to serve Christ's cause—more nearly to act in accordance with the demands which God places upon them—than would otherwise be the case . . . for our people as a nation and a society should be so great that we ought to be willing to say with Paul: 'For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race' (Rom. 9:3, RSV)" (75).

Kaufman acknowledges that this may look like compromise from a Christian pacifist perspective. But "this is emphatically not the case. There is no place for compromise in the Christian ethic, if compromise be interpreted as some kind of voluntary sacrifice of the requirements of love to enable action in some other fashion" (75). Love can adapt itself to every circumstance without compromise, for it is not a rigid absolute. Love is not a law which is the same in all cases, but is responsive to different situations.

"In attempting to deal with the situation in its own terms, love, then, is not compromising itself, but simply being its own true nature—radical, self-giving concern for the neighbor" (75-76).

Kaufman is clear that these three aspects of loving responsibility may not always be easy to reconcile. "It is of course evident that in any given concrete situation there may well be conflicts among these three aspects of the demands of love upon us" (76). He speaks of the example of conscription in relation to the various demands of love and suggests that the Christian could conceivably be led to the paradox of "writing to his congressmen to vote in favor of a given conscription bill as the most adequate for the nation as a whole, but himself finding it necessary to refuse to register under that same bill in order to bear his witness to his deepest Christian convictions. And though he himself be jailed for his noncooperation with the government's program, he might nevertheless find it necessary to support his country's efforts, e.g., to limit the expansion of Russia, as the best expression of the nation's own convictions at present attainable. Despite the external appearance of contradiction, there is no reason why a pacifist Christian could not hold even the highest offices of his nation during wartime. . . . The Christian does not compromise with love when he is doing his utmost to help his society to act as morally as it can; he compromises with love when he is unwilling to take the risk of being in the world, though not of it, through attempting to withdraw. . . . Such withdrawal is the worst possible compromise" because it fails to account for the second and third aspects of love (77-78).

Kaufman concludes his essay by noting that he agrees with John Howard Yoder in recognizing a certain dichotomy of church and world, but he refuses to assume that this implies we should not take responsibility for society. Rather, "the church has absolute responsibility for the moral structure and activity of all of the world" (78). This dichotomy of church and world is "not an objective dichotomy" but subjective, "in the consciousness of the Christian" (79). We should be aware of the parable of the wheat and the tares, and avoid a "dichotomy of condemnation." Such a dichotomy leads to the sin of pride. We should rather have a "dichotomy of understanding" which will help us see that "there is indeed a true distinction between tares and wheat, [but that] they are so intermixed in this world that we must confess that both are in us, i.e., that sin and the world are also present in . . . the church" (79). Such a dichotomy will lead to humility, and to seeing our own complicity in evil. It will lead us to see that our witness to love must be broader than war refusal. It will lead

us to see "the radical solidarity of man" (80) which really makes separation not only wrong but impossible.

Kaufman contends that a "dichotomy of condemnation" not only leads to a false division in humanity, but also in God. Here he is critical of John Howard Yoder whom he quotes as follows about God's different ways of acting: "In the order of conservation, He uses the violent state to punish evil with evil to preserve a degree of order in society and leave room for His higher working in the order of redemption, through nonresistant self-giving love in Christians" (80, quoting "The Anabaptist Dissent"). Kaufman claims that "this kind of dichotomizing makes God into a being of hate and violence as well as love and redemption, a dualism certainly with no basis in the New Testament. . . . Instead of thus dividing the divine being, it is theologically much more adequate to interpret the different ways in which God deals with humankind as his *loving* adaptation of his will to the great variations in humanity's moral needs, moral insights, and moral capabilities, so that even when God uses the violence of the state . . . he is doing so out of his love for them" (80). This does not fail to take account of God's judgment, "but it is always essential to understand even such judgment as an expression of the divine redemptive love, which is God's essence" (80).

II. Kaufman's Vision and Subsequent Mennonite Reality

With the advantage of nearly 40 years of hindsight, it is clear that in a general way Kaufman's call for fuller involvement in the life of our society has been heeded. In a great many ways, Mennonites, by and large, have become fully a part of the professional world of North American life. While this has not extended as fully or dramatically to participation in all parts of government life, great shifts have also been made there. Most Mennonites would perhaps not think of themselves as "taking responsibility" for their society as much as being "involved" in it, but Kaufman's essay has rightly been seen as a pivotal expression of a drive for participation which is a dominant characteristic of Mennonite life since World War II.[6]

With the advantages of hindsight, I am also struck by the way in which Kaufman shared at least one key assumption of

[6]See especially, in addition to Driedger and Kraybill, Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1991) for documentation of these shifts.

Mennonite thinkers of the '50s, an assumption which is no longer so widely shared among Mennonite social ethicists. That assumption is that "nonresistance," not "peacemaking" or "justice" or "nonviolent action," is the pertinent ethical category. In this essay Kaufman agrees with writers such as Guy Hershberger in rejecting a "liberal pacifist" interpretation of the political relevance of Christian ethics.[7] Kaufman speaks of their central ethical norm as "the watered down notion of nonviolent resistance instead of the more radical and difficult notion of nonresistance" (63-64).[8] Considerably later, Kaufman was still using "nonresistance" language in describing the "perfections of the divine love."[9] Indeed, one might suggest that it is partly Kaufman's conviction that nonresistance is somehow the highest ethical ideal that causes him to stress so strongly the centrality of respecting the freedom of the other—even sometimes, it seems, to the point where it brings into question one's own consistency or integrity.

Another observation about Kaufman's essay in light of the experience of the last 40 years is the relative lack of a sense of "over-againstness" in it. Perhaps in order to move away from a traditional "over-againstness" that led to separation and "irresponsibility," Kaufman tends to write as if the key issue is how to become involved in our society, rather than how to wrestle with it in a more radical, prophetic mode. It is true generally that Mennonites have moved in the directions Kaufman's essay points, that is, toward greater participation in all aspects of society, and that this participation has not been particularly "over-against" or prophetic. Yet I believe that the specifically political part of the American Mennonite experience

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[7]See Guy F. Hershberger, *War, Peace and Nonresistance* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1944), especially Chapter XI, "Biblical Nonresistance and Modern Pacifism."

[8]It is interesting to note that on this point Kaufman diverges sharply from Lawrence Burkholder who at the same time in his dissertation was suggesting the possibility of a more active and involved Mennonite social ethic by pointing out that the ethic of Jesus can be seen as including nonviolent resistance as well as nonresistance. While both men have consistently advocated greater involvement with the structures of society, their ways of grounding and articulating an ethic for such involvement were quite different. See Burkholder, *The Problem of Social Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1989).

[9]Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 219-222.

has been generally more critical/over-against/prophetic than Kaufman's essay signals.[10]

When we compare Kaufman's perspectives in this essay with the directions Mennonites have moved we notice that, by and large, the increasing involvement that Mennonites have had with "evil" has come not in the form of "going to the heart of evil" (the centers of decision making power) but in "going to the heart of *suffering*" (where the effects of evil are experienced). While the symbolic center of responsible Christian action implied in Kaufman's essay is Washington, the symbolic center of Christian action as reflected in Mennonite agency programming is a small village in an impoverished African nation. It is obvious that what I describe here is not the center for the lives and actions of most North American Mennonites. Yet it seems clear that there is a major divergence from Kaufman's essay to be found in the thought and practice of Mennonite agencies such as Mennonite Central Committee. We have tended to go to "the least of these" rather than first and primarily to the courts of "the rulers of this world."

Finally, in terms of assessing how Kaufman's essay meshes with subsequent Mennonite directions, it is certainly the case that his plea for Mennonites to extend Christian love outside the borders of the Christian community has been a dominant preoccupation for us in the last half century. From being a very withdrawn group in the early part of the 20th century, Mennonites have moved to a situation where we are well-known for various kinds of service to groups beyond our borders,

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[10]I am speaking here of the intellectual and institutional leadership of "mainstream" Mennonites, not the political attitudes of the majority of Mennonites who, surveys clearly show, are toward the conservative end of the political spectrum (Kauffman and Driedger, 141-143). Also on the matter of the mode of political involvement, there appears to be a significant difference between the U.S. and the Canadian Mennonite situations. See John H. Redekop, "Mennonites and Politics in Canada and the United States," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 1 (1983): 72-105. In general, it seems Canadian Mennonites have more opportunity for and are more comfortable with participation in political office holding, working with their government on a variety of projects than American Mennonites. Needless to say, there is great variety on both sides of the border. But, roughly speaking, I believe Kaufman's essay fits the Canadian Mennonite ethos better than the U.S. Mennonite one. The civil rights movement and especially the war in Vietnam were crucial in causing the development of a rather critical, "prophetic" posture in the United States—perhaps together with a heavier preponderance of "Old" Mennonites. Thus the style of U.S. Mennonite involvement in politics has been more that of a prophet speaking to an essentially alien regime than that of a close policy adviser, one inside "the palace."

whether that be through Mennonite Disaster Service or through MCC.[11] While Kaufman surely cannot be given most of the credit for this shift, he can and ought to be thanked for contributing to it.

III. Questions

While there is much to affirm in what Kaufman has written here, the essay raises several questions for Christian social and political action which I wish to highlight. The questions will, I believe, reflect my reservations about some of the directions in which Kaufman sought to point us.

1. What, really, does responsible Christian love entail? I hear, in the overall thrust of the essay, that it requires "supporting" others in clarifying their deepest convictions and then assisting them in implementing plans based on those convictions. This support, Kaufman writes, may "require holding office in the State Department (or even the Defense Department), if in such capacity one can really aid one's nation in acting as morally as it is possible for it to act" (75). The operative meaning of responsible love here and in the essay overall seems to be something like, "help others understand and then implement their own convictions, from within their own moral worlds."

   Yet there is what seems to me like quite a different strand in the essay. In the sentence immediately following the sentence I just quoted Kaufman writes that responsible, loving support of our American society neighbor "does not allow withdrawal from any level of political responsibility simply to keep one's own hands clean, *if it is clear that through acting in that position we might help our fellow Americans somehow more nearly to serve Christ's cause—more nearly to act in accordance with the demands which God places upon them—than would otherwise be the case*" (75, emphasis added). Though Kaufman apparently does not notice, and perhaps I am mistaken, this "if" seems to represent a very significant qualifier. In fact, this sentence to me suggests quite a

[11]Both our acculturation and our outreaching, serving orientation are captured in a fascinating way in an advertisement produced for the Mennonite Church by Mennonite Board of Missions for major news magazines in the summer of 1993. It featured a "hunk" in overalls using a hand saw to help repair a house and invited people to join our Mennonite brand of "muscular Christianity."

different ethical norm than the one which I see being developed throughout the essay—and one with which I am far happier. If one takes this sentence seriously, the norm is helping the United States to more nearly "serve Christ's cause," not helping it act on its own deepest understandings of itself and its values—which I (and Kaufman) assume may be at variance with serving Christ's cause. Had this norm been developed throughout the essay, much of the rest of what I write would be unnecessary. Difficulties arise, I think, because "responsible love" becomes too unhitched from "serving Christ's cause" in Kaufman's essay.

2. Who is my neighbor? As other writers have noted, Kaufman's essay attends only to what it means for us to love (in his understanding of the meaning of that term) our *American* neighbor, our American society. But what does it mean for us as Christians committed to the way of love when the neighbor we seek to love is harming another neighbor whom we are also admonished to love?[12] Kaufman's narrow focus on loving a particular neighbor, without attending to the implication of that love for loving other neighbors, is perhaps the greatest overarching weakness of the essay. It seems ironic that an interpretation of Christian pacifism, Christian nonresistance, or Christian love (in a Mennonite perspective) could result in supporting American wars, including helping to implement them as a part of love, because those wars reflect the best moral judgment of the American people. Is it not this general kind of interpretation of Christian love which has led to the scandal of Christians participating in wars out of love for their neighbors near at hand and, in those wars, killing their more distant Christian neighbors who are also seeking to defend their Christian neighbors near at hand? Albert Meyer in his response to Kaufman's essay points out the contradiction between *Christian* loyalty and loyalty to other entities, including, and perhaps especially, loyalty to any particular nation. To put the question in a way which connects with part of Kaufman's argument, if our responsibility to love is derived not from

[12]I am especially indebted to Albert J. Meyer, "A Second Look at Responsibility," *Concern, A Pamphlet Series for Christian Renewal* 6 (1958): 30-39, and David Habegger, "'Nonresistance and Responsibility'—A Critical Analysis," *Concern, A Pamphlet Series for Christian Renewal* 7 (1959): 33-40, for helping to shape my response, even though I have not cited them elsewhere in this essay.

our natural connections with certain people, but from God's love and our response to it, why should our loving support be given to our society with which we have natural connections even when that society acts in ways hurtful to other societies which God also loves?

I know Kaufman well enough to know that he is no narrow American nationalist, that he has consistently opposed much that has been wrong with American foreign policy. Surely there is room for some such opposition on the grounds that Kaufman has outlined in this essay, for some of what Mennonites ought to oppose in American foreign policy does not really represent the best moral commitments of the American society in general. When this is so, we can and should seek to show our American neighbors the implications of their own commitments, as Kaufman argues. But not all that is wrong, from a Mennonite Christian perspective, with American policy is a result of our society's failure to live up to its own best commitments. I think, for example, that a war like the Gulf war was not inconsistent with the highest moral instincts of our society, even if I wish American instincts were different. If that is true, are we obligated to "support" such wars—which for Kaufman means also helping to implement them—even though we disagree with them, and to do this in the name of self-giving love for our (American society) neighbor? What then of our love for our Iraqi neighbor?

The point is simply that we have more than one neighbor to love. In situations such as the Gulf war I think our posture needs to be one of forthright witness to our first loyalty to Christ. Our mission is to call for repentance and conversion away from the idolatry of valuing our nation's life and people at the expense of others and to call for loyalty to the God who cares for all equally. At such points to help implement a policy with which we disagree as Mennonite Christians seems to me to compromise our witness to a gospel of peace in a most serious way.

3. With whom should we identify? This is simply another way of posing the first question. It is worth observing that Kaufman was an early proponent, among Mennonites, of "identifying" with others in their situations—starting with them where they are. While sometimes, especially in the cases of the Gulf and the intervention in Somalia, some Mennonite writers have expressed a certain "identification"

with the American cause, the primary struggle over the complications of "identification" in Mennonite social ethics has been over what it means to identify with the poor and the oppressed, not what it means to identify with those who wield power on behalf of the American nation.[13] Identification with the poor and the oppressed in revolutionary situations poses some of the same kinds of dangers which Kaufman's proposed identification entails—the possibility of a too narrow conception of who the neighbor is. In the service experience of Mennonites over the last thirty years or so this has sometimes meant a temptation to "justify" or "accept" or "understand" or "support" violence of the poor and oppressed (with whom we identify) against oppressors. This seems in some ways parallel to Kaufman's "support" of our American societal neighbor.

4. What does it mean to take "responsibility"? Is it true that "taking responsibility" calls us first and foremost to go to the "heart of evil" rather than to the "heart of suffering"? Is the primary calling of the church to seek to modify the policies of the powerful, or to stand with and support the weak? The practice of Jesus and the early church seems to me to suggest that the priority is on identification with and participation in the lives of the marginal rather than seeking to influence policy makers through participation in their structures. This going to the heart of suffering also seems more congruent with our own peculiar vision and experience as Mennonites. It has always been, after all, the "mainline" churches (including Catholic) which have argued that Christians should not fail to take positions of power and "responsibility" because if we refuse worse people will take them, people without our scruples. They have asked us to be "responsible," or in Kaufman's language, to "go to the heart of evil."

   Our response to the "mainstream" has been to say that often deep social transformation comes from the margins, from innovative groups, rather than from those located in the Romes and Washingtons of the world. We have contended that walking with suffering people, seeking concrete ways to meet particular needs in particular places on the basis of

[13]See Gerald Schlabach, "Identification with People in a Revolutionary Situation," *MCC Occasional Paper No. 2* (Akron: Mennonite Central Committee, 1988).

direct involvement with the needy, is "responsible"—indeed is most "responsible," and most helpful. I see little reason to change this basic posture—though we should surely seek to cultivate relationships with the powerful which will enable us to share our learnings and experiences. We should not hide our light under a bushel. But neither should we flock to Washington on the basis of the assumption that if we really want to do good in the world we need to get our hands on the levers of power there.

Another way to put it is to suggest that Kaufman's essay smacks too much of "Constantinianism" for me—the assumption that the center of history, and of God's action in history, is that place where the greatest worldly power is being wielded and that therefore we should be there. It is this assumption that makes it self-evident to many "mainstream" Christian social thinkers (and, ironically, to many Mennonites) that an approach which is unwilling to participate in the coercive, violent power of the state is "irrelevant." All this is to say that Kaufman is right in challenging the notion that "nonresistance" equals irrelevance. But I doubt that the way he seeks to make nonresistance relevant is very helpful. A more fruitful tack, I believe, is to challenge the assumption that to be relevant requires us to occupy positions in which we must help implement policies contradictory to our peacemaking convictions, and to insist instead on the relevance of peacefully building and restoring community through mundane acts of compassion.

5. Who is responsible? One of the most breathtaking statements in Kaufman's essay is this: "As God's agent here on earth—the very body of Christ—the church has absolute responsibility for the moral structure and activity of all of the world" (78).[14] Much depends on just how one reads such a statement, and I am not certain how it ought to be read. Seen in one light—that the whole world is in God's care and that none of it ought to be outside the scope of our care—it is a statement which I can affirm. If it means that we must take responsibility to do whatever needs to be done according to the best moral judgments of our society, however, it is evident from what I have said already that I disagree.

[14]I thank J. R. Burkholder for drawing this sentence and its implications to my attention, and for his other comments on an early draft of this essay.

The crucial question for me, is "Where is God in this"? In comparison, the question of whether, or how, Christians are to be "responsible" is rather minor. Here, and much more clearly in his work on nuclear war, it seems to me that Kaufman moves in the direction of human agency usurping God's place.[15] There is, of course, a danger of humans abdicating responsibility to God, a danger which Kaufman sees and worries about. This is by no means a trivial danger. Yet there is also a danger of feeling a kind of compulsiveness about being responsible for making things come out right which is both self destructive (the weight is more than we can bear if we really take it seriously) and arrogant (if we don't do it, nobody will, the world depends on us, and we can fix it). It seems to me that the final answer to the question "Who is responsible"? is "God is." I look for a sense of modesty, humility about our capabilities and limitations. More, I look for a sense of security, relaxedness, for trust in God's care. We do our part, are "responsible" for what is set before us, yes. But we know God is responsible, finally. In that knowledge we are free to act—and free not to bear the weight of responsibility for all of the world.

6. What mode of political engagement should predominate? Kaufman's essay seems to suggest that our primary mode ought to be that of deep, sympathetic, yet transformative involvement in "the system" at all levels. Yet, as John Yoder has pointed out, the political option which was least tempting to Jesus in his own time was that of the Sadducees, those who sought to work within the system to humanize it.[16] While a case might be made that in "setting his face toward Jerusalem" Jesus headed into the heart of evil (and that in a sense, we too ought to go to the heart of evil sometimes), the mode of his engagement in that "heart of evil" was certainly not the kind of nonresistant "seeking to understand the perspective of the other" mode which Kaufman suggests in this essay. It was sharply confrontational—what Kaufman's essay seems to suggest would be unchristian, or at least "unnonresistant"! The same was also true of the early church. Neither Peter nor Paul hesitated to tell people what they

[15]Gordon Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985).

[16]John H. Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1972), 18-21.

ought to do, or to name their sin as sin—though they also sought to "connect" with people's language and frames of reference. This is to suggest that a more prophetic mode of political engagement may be desirable.[17]

7. What does it mean to really "help" or "support" someone? It seems to me that the essay reflects an excessively zealous concern for avoiding "coercion," a concern which makes it feel that seeking to convince someone of something they do not already believe, rather than helping them clarify their current deepest convictions, may be to fail to be "nonresistant." Do we really help or support people most when we refrain from challenging their deepest beliefs, focusing rather only on helping to clarify what their deepest beliefs are? What becomes of the Christian mandate to call people to conversion? I am not certain just what Kaufman really means by the arguments advanced in this paper around this matter, or if I read him correctly. On the basis of my experience in his classes, I know he often argues hard to convince people of views they do not already hold! But in this essay Kaufman seems to me to argue that "supporting" someone really means helping them clarify their own convictions, by entering their world empathetically, and then assisting them in acting on those convictions. If this is his view, it seems misleading. Surely, really "helping" or "supporting" someone does not always mean helping them do what they deeply believe at that point is best for them. Surely it does mean seeking to convince them to change their views, if one is really convinced that the convictions they hold are wrong. I would not see such attempts to convince as being necessarily "coercive" or "unloving," though they could be, depending upon how they are done and upon the power relationship which exists between the parties.

   Furthermore, to say that refusing to help someone implement a decision which we believe is wrong is a failure to love them leads to many complications. Were we to follow

[17]One might also ask what language is best to use when seeking to make a political witness. How much do we use the language and frame of reference of the political arena to which we speak, and how much do we use our "first language," the language of Christian faith? See my essay, "Christian Nonviolence: An Interpretation," in Terry Nardin, ed., *The Ethics of War and Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) for an example of an attempt to do mainly the latter.

this logic to its conclusion, there is no reason to object to personal participation in military service any more than there is to object to participation in implementing decisions with which we disagree as a high official in the State Department or the Defense Department. If fact, it seems to me that as "nonresistant" Christians we would be obligated to become "nonresistant" soldiers! While Kaufman seems to draw a line between being a soldier and being a Defense Department official helping to implement a war policy with which one disagrees, the difference between the two cases, so far as I can see, is only a practical one, not a moral one—what an individual Mennonite Christian can do, given their age, education, social position, etc. To refuse to be a soldier seems just as surely a failure to love the other (American society) since loving means supporting and helping to "implement" the decision which represents that other's deepest convictions.

It seems that part of the reason for Kaufman's insistence on taking responsibility (in his understanding of it) is the view that the primary motivation for refusing "responsibility" is the desire to keep hands clean. This implies a selfish motive. But if one is convinced that what the other is doing is genuinely wrong, one might want to avoid being an accomplice in a crime. One might be motivated not mainly by a desire to keep one's hands clean for selfish reasons, but by wanting to avoid contributing to harm of others. I recently read of a sixteen year old boy who assisted his older brother in two bank robberies which his brother was convinced he needed to carry out. The younger man did not want his brother to get caught, and so acted out of love for his brother while believing that what he was doing was wrong. It seems to me that Kaufman's argument would lead us to conclude that the younger brother acted rightly—that what he did was to rightly love his brother. I think this is mistaken.[18]

More generally in relation to the question of what it means to love or help one's neighbor, it is doubtful in my mind that the Gospel elevates the freedom of individual consciences to the high position which seems implicit in Kaufman's essay. It is one thing to treat people civilly. It is another to

[18]One way to view the issue here is to see it as a matter of principles versus relationships, or principled ethics versus situation ethics. It can also be viewed, however, as a matter of which set of relationships matter most, or a matter of what is owed to which neighbor. These issues cannot be elaborated further here.

"support" them in doing what we believe is sinful, even to the point of helping to "implement" the decisions of an individual or a society when we disagree with the morality of the decision.

8. All of this is closely related to the next question: Is it not a mistake to emphasize the priority morally of helping people act on what they "subjectively" believe is right while discounting doing what we believe is "really" right? Of course, we want both, and of course, none of us knows fully what is "really" right. Yet we all know of many cases where we say people acted in good conscience (i.e., according to their subjective sense of what was right) but where we also say that what they did was morally wrong. To emphasize as strongly as Kaufman does the importance of making certain that those whom we seek to love act on the basis of their own "subjectively right" conscience, without stressing more the need to convince them of the "really" right (from our perspective) view, seems to be a failure of love.

Of course, on some matters there are times when we will "support" someone in a decision which we believe is mistaken—for example, when they buy a flavor of ice cream we think is awful. In less trivial cases, where moral issues are at stake, however, it is important to note that the word "support" can mean a variety of things ranging on a spectrum from something like a) offering to stand by them and care for them but being clear that we think it is a mistake and refusing to help implement their plan, to something like z) supporting them in the sense of assisting them in carrying out their project. The first kind of "support" is clearly an important kind of "support" for Christians to always offer to anyone who is acting in good conscience. The second kind of "support," however, is only appropriate in certain circumstances.

This issue of what it means to "support" someone has surfaced in recent Mennonite discussion on peace theology, particularly in relationship to debates over military intervention in Somalia. Some have urged that Mennonites ought always to "oppose" military activities, others have urged silence on the specific question of military intervention in certain circumstances, and still others have suggested that in certain cases we might "support" such military activities,

even though we would not participate in them ourselves.[19] In Kaufman's frame of reference, the crucial question would seem to be whether or not the particular military intervention had been decided upon in a way which reflects the best current moral judgments of the society contemplating that intervention. On that basis, it would seem that a great many military interventions would be justifiable and should be "supported," meaning not only moral or political support, but also helping in implementing policy. Surely, so it seems to me, the American intervention in Somalia should have been supported if one judges it on the basis of the then best moral insights of the American society (though this may be less clear to Americans in hindsight). Yet that seems to me an odd criteria on which to base a decision about whether or not to support a military venture. Would not considerations of biblical understandings of morality, of the likely effect of the policy on the recipients of the intervention, etc. which *I* or *we* (that is, the church) hold be factors in judging whether to give or to withhold such support? If the Somalia intervention represented America's best moral insights, Kaufman's frame of reference also would seem to put him farther toward the "support" end of the spectrum of Mennonite positions than any which was articulated publicly during the debate, since it would call for our *helping* the U.S. to implement its military intervention policy.

Ultimately, I believe, the crucial question in this discussion of the meaning of "support" is whether Christians are called primarily to engage people lovingly in an attempt to convince them of the truth of Christian convictions or to support (in the strong sense) them in implementing their own convictions, even where they are contradictory to our understandings of Christian commitments. Issues of "mission" or "evangelism" come finally into play.

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[19]See J. Richard Burkholder and Ted Koontz, "Keeping Our Calling Clear: When Armed Force is Used to Make Relief Work Possible," *Gospel Herald* (January 12, 1993): 6-7; Marv Frey and Ed Epp, "Are We Being Swayed by a 'CNN Theology' of Peace?" *Mennonite Reporter* (February 8, 1993): 7; J. Lawrence Burkholder, "The Dark Side of Responsibility," *Gospel Herald* (March 16, 1993): 6-7; J. Denny Weaver, "We Must Continue to Reject Just War Thinking," *Gospel Herald* (April 27, 1993): 6-8; and Mark W. Charlton, "Pursuing Human Justice in a Society of States: The Ethical Dilemmas of Armed Humanitarian Intervention," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 12 (Winter 1994): 1-20.

9. Closely related to many of the previous points is the question: Does God help sinners carry out their sin? Kaufman does not say explicitly that God does so. Yet he does stress that our action in loving our neighbors when we disagree with them should be like God's in loving us "while we were yet sinners." If we should help our neighbor implement a plan which we believe is sinful, and if we are to act in a way analogous to the way God acts, is not the implication that God supports sinners in the sense of helping them carry out their sinning? There is no question that God can and does use sinful actions to achieve God's ends, yet I doubt that, in a Christian view, God "supports" sinners in their sinning in the strong sense. It is certainly the case that God continues to love, accept, and care for us sinners, in and despite of our sinning, and that God grants us freedom to sin. We should do so in relationship to others as well. It is another matter entirely, however, to suggest that God helps people in implementing their sinful plans, and I believe it is a mistake to think that we are called to do so. All of this is to say that if Kaufman is correct at the end of his essay in challenging a conception of God which seems to cause a "dualism" within God, one might go on to ask whether Kaufman's discussion of God in this essay does not pose equally or more troublesome issues concerning God's nature and God's action in the world.[20]

One does not need to agree with all Kaufman says to recognize that Kaufman's essay is a remarkably rich mine of perspectives which has contributed to the vigorous discussion of peace theology that we as Mennonites have benefited from in the post World War II years. A friend from another Christian tradition who recently attended a Mennonite academic gathering remarked that the level of dialogue was amazingly high, that we likely don't "see" how blessed we are to be given a rich tradition of thought out of which we can converse with one another intelligently and intelligibly. We owe much to Kaufman and to many others who have bequeathed us this treasure.

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[20]See Harry Huebner, "Christian Pacifism and the Character of God," in Harry Huebner, ed., *The Church as a Theological Community: Essays in Honor of David Schroeder* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1990), for a stimulating discussion of God's character and Christian pacifism which echoes some of the concerns Kaufman voices at the end of his essay.

Theology and Pluralism

Chapter 10

Christus Victor, Nonviolence and Other Religions

J. Denny Weaver

In his *Systematic Theology*, Gordon Kaufman developed the doctrine of atonement on the basis of the classic or Christus Victor atonement motif. Although his work was not the original impetus for my own efforts to articulate a theology of atonement using Christus Victor, eventually I discovered that I was moving in a direction already partially charted by Kaufman. However, while we both engaged in demythologizing, the results developed in different directions. In this essay, I will pose an alternative answer that emerges from a beginning point with several things in common with Kaufman's first atonement deliberations. Such a posing of alternatives is not so much a disagreement as a conversation about how theology "imaginatively constructed" can orient us in the world.

In Kaufman's initial discussion of atonement, it is the answer to the central problem of salvation, namely how to rectify the fact that "man has turned away from God and toward himself," that "the possibility of a harmonious and creative community of love on earth, in which each self could find freedom and fulfillment—the kingdom of God" has been exchanged "for a war of all against all."[1] Kaufman noted two dimensions of the problem that the answer needs to address: i) confirming and establishing the sovereignty of God; ii) "genuine love and self-giving" must become the actualities of human intercourse.[2]

Kaufman's solution to atonement was a demythologized revisioning of the classic view of atonement, given prominence as Christus Victor by Gustav Aulén's book of that name.[3] While this view answered the questions about God's sovereignty and establishment of restored relationships among people, Kaufman identified two limitations of it: i) It is dependent on the mythology of the battle between light and darkness. Since people no longer think in these images, it now seems "absurd to speak of literal demons and powers which hold man and the world in

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[1]Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribners, 1968; reprinted 1978), 390.

[2]Ibid., 390.

[3]Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: A Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

bondage and which must be overcome in a mighty battle"; and ii) It is tied to an assumption that the fight is nearly over and God's victory won. As "the final stages of the battle drag on and on, . . . the classic theory appears less and less adequate [as] an expression of the central conviction of Christian faith: that the kingdom of God is really breaking into history, and the church lives in the midst of the process of its establishment."[4]

Kaufman's reformulation of atonement retained two emphases from the classic view. One was the reality of human bondage. Developments in our own century—wars, persistent poverty, nuclear weapons, and much more seem to indicate that history is out of control, and that human beings may well destroy themselves. The Anselmic doctrine of substitutionary atonement "appears irrelevant to the problem" of bondage, while Abelard's hope for changing human hearts "seems pale and weak."[5] In the face of this bondage, atonement must provide hope to people that "God is winning the battle proceeding in the very historical existence in which they are living."[6] Thus the second point retained by Kaufman from the classic view is that "victory is assured, God is indeed overcoming the powers of darkness."[7] That assurance is not based on empirical evidence—such evidence appears to suggest the contrary. Rather, faith in God's sovereignty and deliverance is grounded, as it is throughout the biblical record, in "*memory*. Remembrance of what God has done in the past gives rise to hopes for what he yet shall do to deliver his people" (italics Kaufman's). If the event of Christ "can be understood as beginning a historical process which is transforming human existence into God's kingdom, then it has significance for all time and direct relevance to the contemporary situation."[8]

In Kaufman's following books, both methodology and emphasis shifted from these statements about establishing the sovereignty of God and establishing the reality of the reign of God in history. Kaufman came to understand all theology as "human imaginative construction."[9] In moves culminating in *In Face of Mystery*, Kaufman abandoned the Christus Victor language entirely, and constructed a new set of theological images. Concerns about

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[4]*Systematic Theology*, 394-95.
[5]Ibid., 398.
[6]Ibid., 398-99.
[7]Ibid., 399.
[8]Ibid., 400, 402.
[9]*In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), chapters 3 and 4.

injustice, ecological degradation, and the potential for nuclear self-annihilation by the human race were major factors in the shift.

Kaufman noted that a "deep ambivalence" has always characterized Christian faith, symbolized by the cross and the resurrection,[10] an ambivalence reflected in a christology that includes both Jesus who gave himself for others and taught love of enemies, and Jesus the Christ who sits at the right hand of God and moves history to its culmination.[11] The cross made suffering of "central importance to human life" for Christians, as "the very vehicle of human salvation," and provided "powerful Christian incentives toward self-giving, toward service of the weak, the poor, the unfortunate, toward self-sacrifice for others' well-being."[12] On the other hand, Christianity also had a "strong motif of triumphalism, . . . symbolized above all by the resurrection of Jesus," which eased much of the sting of his self-sacrifice. The self-sacrifice of Jesus brought him exaltation to God's right hand in heaven, and the self-sacrifices of the faithful will gain them a heavenly reward, so that following the way of Christ in the world becomes a matter of "self-interest."[13]

This symbolism of cross and resurrection also "laid the foundations for later Christian imperialism." Christians came to believe "Jesus was the only one through whom God's grace and salvation were mediated to men and women." With symbols and doctrines developed to express the uniqueness of Jesus, "it is hardly surprising that with this sort of exalted self-interpretation the church would eventually become corrupted into crusades against the infidels and inquisitorial tortures and executions of heretics; and that it would ultimately give its blessing to western imperialism, and to the exploitation and enslavement of non-Christian peoples and cultures around the globe."[14]

The triumphal dimensions of this symbolism are ultimately anchored in the dualistic world-picture of traditional theology. This world-picture implies a fundamental "cleavage" between God and the world, that is, between "the source of all that is" and "the world and all its contents." God inhabits the realm "outside" or "other than" the finite world which is the product of God's creation.[15] Not only is this sort of dualism "no longer

[10]Ibid., 377.
[11]Ibid., 381.
[12]Ibid., 377-78.
[13]Ibid., 378.
[14]Ibid., 379.
[15]Ibid., 271.

plausible" in light of our modern view of the universe. It is also religiously dangerous. The dualistic world view "portrays God as an absolutely authoritarian figure of utter omnipotence, . . . [that] has often been taken by believers as authorizing and legitimating highly destructive forms of human activity—'holy' wars, persecutions, inquisitions, crusades, torture."[16]

Kaufman's well-known solution was to abandon the traditional language and imagery, and to construct new images which speak to the needs of the modern world. A modern christology will combine what we know of the story of Jesus with Kaufman's reconstructed understanding of God as the "serendipitous creativity" which has worked through the evolutionary, historical trajectory to produce human beings.[17] The result is what Kaufman called a "wider christology."[18] This christology incorporates the "whole complex web of sayings and revelatory events within which early Christians found themselves."[19] Instead of narrowing the normatively human down to the image of a single supernatural individual, this Christ makes God incarnate in the "larger, more complex human reality, surrounding and including and following upon the man Jesus: the new Christian community."[20] This wider christology eliminates the "historical parochialism" of identifying the universal God with a particular individual.[21] It also makes intelligible the notion that God works in history in terms of the evolutionary-historical process,[22] while the direction and presence of God becomes visible to human eyes only in Jesus.[23] The wider Christ presents the image of an "inclusive egalitarian community" that has the potential to include "all the great diversity of ways of being human which we find in our world, so long as they are healing and reconciling and humanizing (in the christic sense) and do not seek to be oppressive or otherwise destructive to others."[24]

> Though centering on the man Jesus, the Christ-symbol is portrayed as extending beyond this solitary figure to include the community of reconciliation that grew up in response to his work—and in principle, thus, it can be extended to all

[16]Ibid., 272.
[17]A following section of this essay deals with world view.
[18]Chapter 25 of *In Face of Mystery* is called "A Wider Christology."
[19]*In Face of Mystery*, 383.
[20]Ibid., 383.
[21]Ibid., 386.
[22]Ibid., 386.
[23]Ibid., 388.
[24]Ibid., 396-97.

> communities of genuine healing, love, and justice. Thus, any community which becomes a vehicle in history of more profoundly humane patterns of life . . . is to be understood theologically as helping to constitute (in its own distinctive way) the fullness of Christ. Our christology provides us, thus, with a vision of human existence that extends from a focal point to wider and wider communities of reconciliation and love, justice and peace, freedom and creativity.[25]

This wider christology was constructed with "a spirit of self-giving, love, reconciliation, [and] building of community," which is needed at this time when "the various cultural streams of humanity seem today to be converging rapidly into a single interconnected human history."[26] Such convergence of peoples and cultures and communities is necessary if the human race is to survive in a world threatened by ecological disorder and nuclear annihilation. As a whole, this view of Christ provides a configuration of images that provide a paradigm of both the human and the divine: it makes intelligible our understanding of human existence, but also helps to identify the evolutionary-historical trajectory that is moving it toward fuller humanization.[27]

I share Kaufman's concerns about the possibility of ecological and nuclear disaster. I agree with his critique of Christian triumphalism, and the misuse of Christian images of victory to justify crusades, colonialism, and destruction of nonChristian cultures. My theological solutions also began with a revisioning and reconstructing of the Christus Victor atonement image. However, my theologizing has taken a different path than Kaufman. In the remainder of this essay, I will illustrate that different path which shares a good deal of its point of departure with Kaufman's concerns, and suggest a model which deals with both the relationship between Christian theologies that support and reject violence, and the relationship of Christian faith to other religious faiths.

I. Christus Victor as Peace Theology

I believe that nonviolence, pacifism, and the rejection of intentional use of violence are intrinsic to christology and to the

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[25]Ibid., 397.
[26]Ibid., 407.
[27]Ibid., 410.

Christian gospel. Without that commitment to nonviolence, it cannot be authentically *Christ*ian gospel and *Christ*ian faith. A defense of violence in the name of Christ is a contradiction in terms. While Kaufman would likely not state those assumptions in quite the same categorical terms, he clearly shares a belief that the renunciation of violence is integral to the discussion of what it means to be a Christian in the world. While Kaufman depicted the ambiguity of New Testament christology, which pictures both a nonviolent earthly Jesus and a triumphal heavenly Christ, I have sought to recover what I believe are the nonviolent foundations of the classic imagery. While Kaufman abandoned the classic imagery, due to its appropriation in the name of crusades, inquisition, slavery, western colonialism and the like, my approach has been to develop explicitly nonviolent interpretations of the classic imagery, and to show its roots in history. My intent is to construct a Christian theology which makes evident that Christian rationalization of military activity as peace keeping should seem as incongruous as labeling a bird cage a radio, a bowling ball an ironing board, or a bird a door knob.[28]

Christus Victor as Narrative Christology—When the life of Jesus is understood as a making present of the reign of God in the historical realm, then the story of Jesus becomes a historicized version of Christus Victor. The motif appears clearly in the narrative of Jesus' return from his temptation in the wilderness. In opening his public ministry at Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30), Jesus' use of Isaiah 61 posed the reign of God in social and historical terms as a contrast to the kingdoms of the world. The expulsion of Jesus from Nazareth acted out the clash of reigns. In the ensuing course of Jesus' mission, healings, exorcisms, and nature wonders such as a miraculous catch of fish or stilling of a storm indicate the power of the rule of God over the physical and spiritual forces which enslave individuals, as well as over the natural order. Jesus' associations with women, Samaritans, various outcasts and downtrodden people make clear that God identifies with the plight of the oppressed and those who suffer injustice. The confrontation of reigns reached its culmination with the crucifixion, when brute force killed Jesus in an apparent

[28]I have on file a political cartoon, clipped from a local newspaper, which portrays these incongruities. The last frame pictures a plane with United States insignia, falling and exploding bombs, and people flying through the air. The caption reads, "This is Keeping the Peace in Somalia."

triumph for the powers of evil. Resurrection then displayed the power of the reign of God over the ultimate enemy—death.

The victory of resurrection inaugurated a new era in the reign of God in our history. It provided the definitive witness to the presence of the rule of God in history. Acknowledging and accepting this victory over death frees people from bondage to the powers of evil, and frees them to follow the teaching of Jesus even if following is costly or dangerous. "Being Christian" means to become part of the narrative of Jesus, having that narrative shape one's life and thought.

This brief sketch of the life of Jesus serves as a narrative christology that fits events of Jesus' life as recorded in the Gospels into the image of Christus Victor, which gives Christus Victor roots in the historical arena.

Christus Victor in Revelation—Although not readily apparent at first glance, the book of Revelation presents Christus Victor rooted in history from another perspective.[29] This explanation illustrates how the symbols of Revelation correspond to events in the life of Jesus and in the first century of Christian history. First we observe that much of Revelation uses the imagery of a cosmic conflict and victory à la Christus Victor—a confrontation between good and evil, between the forces of God and the forces of Satan, between Christ and anti-Christ, each with its identifying mark. Through cross and resurrection, God's reign prevails in the confrontation and the risen Christ reigns as Lord.

The lion and lamb symbols of chapter 5, which both refer to Jesus, portray one instance of a conqueror motif—the lion is a symbol of victory while the lamb signifies the (nonviolent) manner of victory. In chapters 6 and 7, it is the nonviolent conqueror who has earned the right to open the seals. Seals one to four and six progress through various kinds of oppression and destruction, culminating with utter chaos in the first scene of seal six. Seal five shifts view point to the heavenly realm, where the souls of the martyrs bemoan the slowness of God in avenging

[29]Much of my interpretation of Revelation has been shaped in conversation with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); and Vernard Eller, *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible: Making Sense out of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). For an earlier discussion of Christus Victor and Revelation, see J. Denny Weaver "Atonement for the NonConstantinian Church," *Modern Theology* 6 (July 1990): 307-23; see also "Christus Victor, Ecclesiology, and Christology," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68 (July 1994), 277-90.

their deaths caused by the oppression and destruction pictured in seals one to four and six. Seal six then poses a contrast. Juxtaposed with the chaos of scene one are two images of the people of God—one emphasizing continuity with Israel, the other encompassing all ethnic, cultural, language and national groups—engaged in a celebration of the victory of the lamb, which established the reign of God over the accumulation of evil that mounted through seals one to four and six. This celebration matches that of chapter 5, which acclaimed the victory of the slaughtered Lamb, the resurrected Christ.

More than emphasizing a victory motif, Revelation 12 uses the specific images of Christus Victor. The birth and snatching of the male child to the throne of God are a transparent reference to the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus. Its significance is depicted via the classic image of Christus Victor—war of Michael and his angels against the dragon and his angels, the forces of God versus the forces of Satan. Conquered by the death and resurrection of Jesus and the testimony of the martyrs, the Dragon—Satan, the Devil—is expelled from heaven, while the heavenly announcer proclaims victory (Rev 12.10-11).

Beyond Jesus, the symbols of Revelation also have antecedents in events from the first century of Christian history. The well-known sequence of seven seals in chapters 6 and 7 deals with the Roman emperors from Tiberius (14-37 AD, seal 1), during whose rule Jesus was crucified, through Caligula (37-40 AD, seal 2), Claudius (41-54 AD, seal 3), Nero (54-68 AD, seal 4), and Vespasian (69-79 AD, seal 6), to the short reign of Titus (79-81 AD) or more likely Domitian (81-96 AD, seal 7). Seal 5 coincides with the gap between Nero and Vespasian when three claimants were unsuccessful in attempts to consolidate power and receive the imperial crown. Each seal contains a symbolic reference to one or more elements from the reign of the corresponding emperor.[30]

I suggest, for example, that the chaos of the first scene of seal six depicts the virtually unfathomable feelings of despair and tragedy which would come upon the heirs of David when the temple was destroyed and his city, Jerusalem, fell in 70 AD to a Roman army commanded by Vespasian's son Titus. However, celebration occurs in the midst of destruction. As symbolized by

[30]For the specifics of this argument, see "Atonement for the NonConstantinian Church," 311-15; for an updated analysis, see J. Denny Weaver, *Keeping Salvation Ethical: Mennonite and Amish Atonement Theology in the Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Scottdale: Herald Press, forthcoming), chapter 2.

the cheering throngs of Revelation 7, for those who perceive the resurrection of Jesus, the rule of God has already triumphed. In the face of the accumulation of evil experienced under the rule of Rome, the rule of God has already begun on earth with a victory, the resurrection of Jesus.

Finally, this celebration leads to the seventh seal, which does not advance the chronology, but begins a new cycle of seven, thus indicating the likely time frame in which Revelation was written. Revelation delivers a cosmic and eschatological perspective on events in the historical world. The destruction and oppression which accompany the empire may continue—but so does the victory of the reign of God for those who see resurrection as a victory.

The symbols of chapter 12 function in similar fashion to provide a cosmic dimension to events in the historical arena. The defeated, seven-headed dragon apparently symbolizes Rome, the city which legend says was built on seven hills, while the ten horns and seven crowns correspond to the seven crowned emperors and three claimants previously noted. Thus the imagery of chapter 12 is another instance of depicting the cosmic and eschatological dimension of the historical confrontation of Christian church and Roman empire. As the struggling and numerically insignificant church contemplates the might of Rome, the temptation is to despair. However, for those who perceive the resurrection of Jesus, the reign of God has already triumphed. The victory celebrated in 12:10-12 has already happened—"*now* [emphasis mine] have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah." I suggest that Revelation is indeed a statement about the meaning of historical events, using the imagery of Christus Victor.

Christus Victor and worldview—The narrative of the Gospels and the book of Revelation provide two views on the same or related world events. The narrative from the Gospels depicts Jesus from the perspective of people who walked beside him on the dusty roads of Palestine. Revelation depicts the events of Jesus's life, and in my interpretation of the antecedents of the seven seals, follows the chronology of the church through most of the rest of the first century, from the perspective of its eschatological and universal meaning. The Gospels depict particular events from the standpoint of a bystander and participant, from a temporal or earthly perspective. Revelation depicts those events in terms of their significance and meaning in God's universal and cosmic history.

While this construction of Christus Victor does ask us to believe that particular events have universal significance, it does not require us to adopt a "spooks in the sky" world view, an outdated cosmology of a three-layered universe populated by personal demons who inhabit an upper realm and engage in actual combat with the forces of God. The conflict of Christus Victor is not that of personal beings fighting in an upper realm, a place. It is rather a description of a confrontation and conflict between structures in the historical world, namely between Jesus and the political and religious structures of his day, then between the church and the empire. The cosmic language from Revelation supplies the significance of these historical events for God's history rather than depicting a battle in the upper realm. With this view of Christus Victor, the problem for faith is not to accept an outdated world picture, as modern fundamentalism sometimes asks. The faith problem is rather to believe that the particular events of Jesus have universal significance, and that there is universal significance in the continuation of the small, first century sect that accepted Jesus as Messiah.

Walter Wink's work on the nature of the powers fits this description of Christus Victor. According to Wink's analysis, the powers are the "spiritual" dimension of material structures. Thus the various powers and demons are not personal beings and they do not inhabit a place. All the powers in the world—the state, corporations, economic structures, political structures, and so on—have spiritual and material dimensions, inner and outer aspects. Power does not exist independent of a material incorporation or system. The spiritual or inner essence is the collective cultural ethos which surrounds a specific outer manifestation. Thus the powers are real but not personal. Their goodness or wickedness depends on whether or not they assert their existence over against or under the lordship of Christ.[31] This approach supplies evil with a corporate as well as a personal dimension. It is the powers described in this way, manifested in structures such as the Roman empire, that confronted and killed Jesus and continued to confront the church. In fact, since structures described in this way inherit the components of earlier generations, this is a description of powers of evil which makes it possible to visualize that at his death, Jesus confronted the entire complex of evil in the cosmos.

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[31]Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

In another way, however, this statement of historicized Christus Victor does challenge a modern worldview. We live in a universe I sometimes describe as finitely infinite—a universe which appears infinite and whose edge we cannot find but every part of which is still subject to objective study and measurement by technology. As noted earlier, this cosmology appears to have no "place" for God and Kaufman considers it "unthinkable" that help for the human predicament could come from a God who is beyond or "outside" of or on the "other side" of the universe in which we live and of human experience as we know it.[32] Kaufman's solution is to surrender the picture of God as "a personal being in the heavens above," since such a God would need a "place" in which to exist. Instead, Kaufman constructs a model of God that fits the world picture of the finitely infinite cosmos. Identified as "serendipitous creativity" in *In Face of Mystery*, this picture of God retains the idea of meaning or direction in history but separates that meaning or direction from the idea of God as an "individual ego" who would direct it.[33] This reconstructed image of God does have personalistic dimensions, however. Since people are "social selves," whose selfhood is created through "interpersonal relationships," the idea of God must include "certain highly personalistic dimensions" if it is to draw people to a fuller realization of their humanity.[34]

Christus Victor as I have described it does challenge a modern world view to the extent that it continues to work with God as a center of will, and to assume that the will of God is manifested in a way that is not fully contained within or described by our human ways of knowing. And Christus Victor as depicted here assumes that the resurrection of Jesus was some kind of real event, more than vivid memories in the mind of his disciples. Without engaging Kaufman in a debate which would range far beyond the scope of this paper as well as my capabilities, I respond with a question: Is it any more difficult or illogical to accept the idea of God without a "place" in which to locate that God than it is to assume that history and creation reveal purpose and direction not due to chance but without God to control that purpose and direction? Particularly when we remember that *all* language about God is metaphor? In light of such questions, I suggest that some of the impulse to reconstruct the image of God is lessened if there is another way to deal with the supposedly

[32]*In Face of Mystery*, 271, 305, 325.
[33]Ibid., ch. 22; terms quoted, 332.
[34]Ibid., 338.

authoritarian imagery for God, which has been used in "legitimation of 'holy' wars, persecutions, inquisitions, crusades, torture."[35] The following section suggests that Christus Victor in fact has a quite different understanding of God, one completely antithetical to the destruction and abuse done in the name of God.

The ethics of Christus Victor—i) From the side of Jesus. The familiar ethics of the narrative of Jesus requires only brief listing in this setting. The well-known sayings from the Sermon on the Mount teach that under the rule of God people do not resist evil, go the second mile, love and pray for their enemies (Matt. 5.39-46). Those who come under the rule of God show it by living it. "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46). On the road to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus made it clear to the disciples that the mission of the Messiah would be accomplished through suffering and death—a nonviolent confrontation of the forces of evil—and that his followers must expect the same (Matt. 16.13-26). When the mob came to arrest him in the garden, and Peter began to defend Jesus with his sword, Jesus quickly halted the effort (John 18.10-11). Above all the narrative displays Jesus' nonresistant and nonviolent death. Such observations make clear that Jesus' life and teaching are intrinsically nonviolent. Violence perpetrated in the name of Jesus denies his life and teaching. If Jesus' life and teaching are intrinsically nonviolent, they are also confrontational. Familiarity with the narratives again requires only a brief listing. When Jesus healed the man's withered hand on the Sabbath, he drew attention to the deed and the deliberate defiance of the prevailing understanding of the law (Luke 6.8-10). He used irony and sarcasm, the edge of which sometimes goes unnoticed in modern, popular renderings of the text (Matt. 11.17-19; 23.27-28; 26.55; Luke 7.32-34.) Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4.7-23) countered conventional Jewish standards both in his dealing with a woman and with a Samaritan and in willingness to travel through Samaria. The end of Jesus' life was precipitated by a quite abrupt confrontation, namely the cleansing of the temple (Matt. 21.12-13; Mark 11.15; Luke 19.45-46). Such stories display quite clearly that the peaceable reign of God made visible in Jesus confronted unjust structures of the social order and posed alternatives to them.

[35]Ibid., 272.

ii) In cosmic perspective. In Revelation, Jesus is both lion and lamb. The transition of images from lion to lamb distinguishes the fact of victory from the means of victory. This transition is particularly evident in light of the fact that the lion makes his only appearance of the book in Rev. 5:5.[36] The victory celebrated in the resonant hymns in chapters 4, 5, and 7 is that of the lamb, a victory accomplished through Jesus' death and resurrection, by the "blood of the lamb," because the lamb "was slaughtered." The means to victory was the nonviolent death of Jesus.

The church, and in particular the martyrs, also contribute to the victory. The empire *qua* Satan of chapter 12 is conquered by the "blood of the Lamb" as well as "by the word of their [martyrs'] testimony." The persistence of people who refused to acknowledge the authority of Rome testifies to belief in the power and the truth of the reign of God. Again nonviolent resistance is intrinsic to the victory in the reign of God.

Beyond appeal to a specific image, such as the symbol lamb and the fact that the lamb of Revelation is resurrected ("has the marks of slaughter on it"), the overall structure of the symbols of Revelation assumes a nonviolent confrontation. Chapters 4-7 form one such unit, as it is the slain and resurrected lamb who supplies the victory celebrated in the sixth seal in the midst of a supposedly devastating loss. The defeat of the dragon of chapter 12 is not a military-type defeat—it is celebrated on the basis of blood of the lamb and the witness of martyrs. Removing the element of nonviolence, setting nonviolence aside as something incidental to Jesus and not related to the essence of the reign of God, is really to dismantle the structure of the symbols of Revelation. The conduct of Jesus and of the church clearly posed an alternative to emperor and empire. Only if looked at from within the presuppositions of efficacious violence so central to the outlook of North Americans does this nonviolent confrontation appear to be passive and submissive. The ethics of Christus Victor is inherently a nonviolent ethic. It is also a confrontational ethic, one that assumes that being Christian may well mean being part of a structured witness over against the prevailing social order.

The political and conflictive imagery of Revelation coupled with language of triumph and victory has raised problems for modern interpreters of both Revelation and of Christian theology more

[36]I want to thank Loren Johns, whose doctoral dissertation concerns the peace theology of Revelation, for bringing the significance of this particular point to my attention.

broadly understood. As Kaufman indicated, these problems become particularly acute in light of past appeals to a triumphal Christianity as justification for medieval crusades, western colonial domination of African and Asian peoples, subjugation and removal of the indigenous population of North America, imperialistic missionary endeavors, and the like. The response has frequently been to look elsewhere for sources of truth or to reject the political imagery outright and begin anew to think and write Christian theology.[37] However, such a response neglects to ask about *how* Jesus was political. I have proposed a different kind of answer. Instead of seeking alternative standpoints or a new theology, in this essay I have argued that the violent, imperialistic, triumphalist interpretation of the political imagery is an incorrect understanding of politics and victory. Victory through the death and resurrection of Jesus, victory participated in through the nonviolent resistance of the church, renders quite "*un*Christian" any violent, crusading, imperialistic, military endeavors in the name of Christ, including modern military endeavors done with supposedly "humanitarian" goals. Rather than rejecting the political imagery, I suggest that Christians recover the true character of that imagery, a politics of the nonviolent teaching, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

I can state the significance of the intrinsically nonviolent character of the political imagery in another way. As noted earlier, Kaufman contrasted the nonviolent historical Jesus and the triumphal imagery of the risen and divine Christ in whose name persecution and war have been carried out. While my analysis has suggested that the political imagery has a nonviolent interpretation and therefore corresponds to the nonviolent Jesus of history, the division described by Kaufman reflects what came to be the theology of the church after Constantine. In effect, the church after Constantine came to separate theology from ethics. While salvation depended on Jesus identified with God, the social ethics of Christians became linked to the emperor: with the success of the church linked to the fortunes of the empire, it became expedient to justify using the emperor's violent means to preserve the empire in order to preserve the church.[38] The classic

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[37]In addition to Kaufman's complete rethinking of theology, note, for example, Adela Yarbro Collins's appeals to the values of "humanization, justice, and love" (*Crisis and Catharsis*, 167).

[38]On the implications of Constantine for ethics, see John Howard Yoder, "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984), 135-47.

creedal language, which defined Jesus as "one substance with the Father" and as the "second person of the Trinity" and "truly God and truly man" in fact provided a way to confess Jesus without being committed to live the teaching and example of Jesus. These were formulas which thus fit the situation of the church symbolized by Constantine, namely the church which ceased being a minority, alternative church and became the church which identified with the society and worked with and through the institutions of the social order, including the army.[39]

The theology of Christus Victor as I have depicted it fits the pre-Constantinian church, the church which posed an alternative to or confronted the institutions of the social order, beginning with the empire. It is such an intrinsically nonviolent theology and such a view of the church which were abandoned after the empire's conversion which is symbolized by Constantine's adoption of Christianity. The argument for an intrinsically nonviolent understanding of Christus Victor is thus a statement about a nonviolent ecclesiology. It brings together again the ethics and theology which the Constantinian church allowed to separate.

This section has sketched an intrinsically nonviolent version of a historicized Christus Victor. It remains for the final section to provide a model for the way that this nonviolent theology may interact with, and dialogue with other religions.

II. Christus Victor and Other Religions

Parameters of the discussion—In dealing with other religions, a believers church or free church ecclesiology—identifying believers church with the terminology for Christus Victor developed in this essay—works from an inherently different outlook than does the dominant church. It is the difference between Christian faith—and a church—which recognizes its minority, alternative status over against the social order in contrast to a Christian faith which accepts, supports and is expressed through the institutions of the social order, or assumes the right to impose its structures on the social order. In other words, the latter identifies its cause and its fortunes with the success and continuance of the social

[39]For a more complete discussion, see my "Christology in Historical Perspective," in Erland Waltner, ed., *Jesus Christ and the Mission of the Church: Contemporary Anabaptist Perspectives* (Newton: Faith and Life, 1990), 83-105; and "Christus Victor, Ecclesiology, and Christology," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68 (July 1994): 277-90.

order, whereas the former dares to proclaim a particular, minority truth with universal intent as a witness to the dominant social order. As just indicated, it was the church identified with the social order which assumed a theology that separated ethics from christology and atonement, an assumption which rationalized the "Christian" use of the structures and the means of the social order, presumably violent ones, to maintain its dominant status vis-à-vis dissidents and opponents. The theology of Christus Victor thus means not only taking seriously that the theology of the alternative church has a fundamentally different orientation than the theology which emerged from the so-called dominant church, but also acknowledging that the alternative church—the ecclesiology of Christus Victor—is actually a truer picture of Christianity in the world, namely that of a minority group which had and still has the apparent audacity to make universal claims about the particular events of Jesus Christ.[40] Describing how the peace theology of historicized Christus Victor deals with other religions means taking seriously the different orientations of Christian theology. It is a conversation with the Christianity of rationalized violence as well as with nonChristian religions.

Believers church, Christus Victor ecclesiology sounds exclusive to many modern people. It visualizes the reign of God over against or posing an alternative to the world, and it identifies the church as the structure which gives that alternative visibility within the social order. That orientation just does not sound very polite in North American society that advocates tolerance and pluralism. Further, for many listeners, it also appears proud. How does a minority religion have the audacity to proclaim its truth as universal? And how does a minority Christian theology have the effrontery to proclaim the intrinsically nonviolent nature of Christian theology in light of the overwhelming majority of people for whom the apparent need for and the efficacy of violence to preserve order seems to be common sense? Finally, even when Christus Victor as described in this essay emphasizes

[40]Cyprian's third century treatise *On Unity* stated that there was no salvation outside the church, and located unity of the church in terms of communion with the recognized bishops of the church throughout the empire. This exclusion policy enabled the church to retain a belief in its unity while actually including a great deal of disunity and variant theological viewpoints. (See Frances Young, *The Making of the Creeds* [Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991], 60.) Such observations make it more clear that the so-called dominant view was/is also a particular political perspective proclaimed with universal intent, which should then also make clear that the "believers church" is not made illegitimate by its claim to proclaim a particular gospel with universal intent.

nonviolence, it still retains the potentially offensive language of victory. Kaufman's answer to these questions and challenges was a reconstructed theology which indeed rejected violence and triumphalism and which supports humanizing efforts in a wide range of religious expressions that might advance what he perceives is a modern convergence into one interconnected human history. Continuing the conversation, how then might the intrinsically nonviolent Christus Victor proclaim the universal truth of the victory of Christ without being guilty of exclusivism or triumphalism?

I want to describe the interaction of Christus Victor with other religions in a way that i) retains a claim about Jesus Christ as the ultimate norm of truth; ii) can pose alternatives to other religions without at the same time undercutting their own claims to the ultimacy of their particular truth; iii) thus, avoids triumphalism; iv) can engage in genuine dialogue with other religions; and v) assumes the intrinsically nonviolent character of Christian theology.

Christus Victor and other religions—The interaction of religious perspectives occurs within the cosmology earlier depicted as a finitely infinite universe. The boundaries of our reality in time and space are unfathomable. Aside from the issue noted earlier about a "place" for God, this cosmology also affords us no location for an objective view of all of reality. While we exist at a particular location within that reality, this cosmology offers us no neutral or objective standpoints from which to observe and compare the various traditions and the religious claims about that reality. There is no observational standpoint that does not make the observer inescapably an intrinsic part of what is observed. When we do not know the location of the unfathomable boundaries of reality, we cannot objectively locate ourselves within reality. We can only comment from a position within the mix and on the basis of presuppositions shaped by one or another set of assumptions about the reality within which we exist. There is no objective certainty or objective truth by which to measure the interaction of the various religions, in this particular instance, the interaction of Christus Victor and religions.

The image of trajectories is helpful at this point.[41] Each religion, each religious story, is a bit like a trajectory that passes through a segment of that vast reality with unfathomable boundaries. Each trajectory attempts to measure and fathom that finitely infinite reality. The trajectories may have beginning points, analogous to the founders or founding events of religions, which give them some direction, measured in relation to the other trajectories through reality. While clearly different, each trajectory does nonetheless offer some version of a viable path through the reality it perceives. However, there is no neutral or objective vantage point from which to assess and compare the trajectories simultaneously, and to determine objectively which trajectory is best placed to view or to traverse reality. The unfathomableness of the edges of reality allow no objective comparison or location of those paths which appear to have beginning points and move toward a future culmination (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) in contrast to those which assume a cyclical or unending view of reality (e.g., Hinduism or Buddhism).

Trajectories may intersect.[42] That intersection indicates some kind of commonality, and it is at these points of intersection that dialogue can properly begin. On the basis of this commonality, it is possible for the trajectories to compare their headings and to discuss together the point or points that they hold in common. Such discussions may cause one or both trajectories to change direction—as when Catholics and Lutherans decided after 450 years of enmity that they have a common understanding of Christ's presence in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Such discussions can result in cooperative activity without conversion from one trajectory to another—as when Buddhists and Christians or Jews and Christians, have cooperated in peace activism or the civil rights movement. This model can incorporate

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[41]The discussion of the model of trajectories expands a similar discussion in the final section of my "Narrative Theology in Anabaptist-Mennonite Context," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 12 (Spring 1994), 171-88.

[42]This discussion is a model for understanding more than a strategy manual for particular dialogues. I have located truth within a narrative which confesses the universal meaning of the particular historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. Stated succinctly, when that narrative enters conversation with other religions, in some cases it will mean a comparison of this narrative with another's myths. The evident disjuncture of a narrative-myth comparison does not invalidate the discussion but does point out the difficulty of the problems involved. For example, in light of the location of Christian truth in a particular narrative, what is the point of intersection with Hinduism, which understands the ultimate goal of the human as something like an escape from the particular and merger with the all-pervading *Brahman*, God, the One?

what I have heard from Terry Widrick and Lawrence Hart—namely a Christian theology of nonviolence grafted on or as the culmination of a nonviolent Native American theology. If I understand them correctly, in forms that reflect their particular native traditions, both understand the nonviolent gospel of Jesus Christ as the completion of a Native American religion that taught nonviolence; respect for creation, for the land, and for women; that God does not lie; that God wants a people.[43]

Such discussion between or among trajectories may also reveal differences—hence different trajectories—where a common confession was previously assumed. Not even all those professing Christ as norm of truth are necessarily on the same trajectory. Billy Graham prayed with George Bush the night before Bush announced that he had ordered the destruction of Iraq. Graham's blessing on that decision, actually his claim that he was not blessing the war but merely ministering to a soul in need, would seem to put him on the kind of Christian trajectory that rationalizes violence on the order of Constantine rather than the trajectory of intrinsically nonviolent Christus Victor delineated in this essay. Similar observations apply to the action of Bill Clinton during activities in Normandy in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day. In one pre-planned and well-publicized event, Clinton knelt on the ground and arranged stones in the form of a cross, in honor and memory of the men killed during the invasion. Such use of the cross would seem to put Clinton on a different Christian trajectory than the one I have sketched. In these instances, in spite of a confession of the name of Jesus and the use of Christian symbols which we might share, the attitude toward the nation and the use of violence reveals, I believe, not one but two differing versions of the Christian story. One version assumes that Christian faith expresses itself through the nation or is some way compatible with the nation, while the other story understands the Christian story as an alternative to the nation. These two stories fit the church before and after Constantine, the church which poses an alternative and the church which expresses itself through the social order.

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[43]Terry Widrick, "The Gift of the Pipe," *Intotemak*, Nov-Dec, 1989; presentations at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 2 November 1991; Lawrence Hart, presentations at First Mennonite Church and at Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio, 25-27 October 1992; "Native American Traditional Religion and Christian Faith," presentation at Mennonite Central Committee Peace Theology Colloquium, Messiah College, Grantham, Pa., 17 June 1994.

The model of trajectories might apply similarly to the question of whether Mennonite Central Committee ought to support supposedly humanitarian operations by the military. It might allow, for example, for parallel activity—trajectories—of military and Mennonite volunteers when the National Guard arrives alongside Mennonite Disaster Service at a site of massive floods, but acknowledge location on entirely divergent trajectories when the military operates primarily to enhance its image as "peacemakers", as was true in large part for the incursion of US marines into Somalia. The image of intersecting trajectories provides a way to understand the points of commonality but without necessarily implying that the common points mean a common foundation.

The model of trajectories clarifies the nature of apparent commonalities and unperceived differences in orientation. It also provides a model for understanding how one can make common cause or affirm a common humanity at appropriate points with nonChristian religions while yet retaining belief in Jesus Christ as the ultimate norm of truth. As argued above, ethics—and specifically the rejection of violence—belongs in an inseparable way to the story of Jesus the bearer of the reign of God. There are, however, other Christian stories which do not understand the story of Jesus in that intrinsically nonviolent way. For the sake of unity with such Christian stories, the temptation exists for the peace church to separate ethics from the Christian story. NonChristian religions have some ethical, social, and humanitarian concerns which the Christian peace church can affirm. Again the temptation exists for the peace church to unhook nonviolence, social concerns, and justice issues from its theology—most specifically from its christology—out of love and concern for all humankind and in order to affirm a common humanity with those of other faiths. I can describe at least four such possibilities: i) One temptation locates Christian unity in a creed or confession of faith or doctrinal core claimed by the majority of Christians—such as the Nicene creed, or a list of fundamentalist propositions—but without making ethics and nonviolence an explicit part of that core. ii) Another temptation is to locate the Christian foundation in some kind of experience common to many Christians—a specific kind of conversion experience, a certain kind of spirituality or inner life, a charismatic experience—all of which enable one to claim Christ but without dealing with questions of ethics and nonviolence. A variant of this temptation is to discover a unity in a common experience of God or of the Ultimate that transcends any and all

particular religious traditions. iii) A third temptation would locate the essence of Christian unity in a task such as evangelism—enabling cooperative activity as long as the point of difference, namely rejection of violence, is not mentioned. iv) The fourth possibility would locate a common framework in a specific behavior such as the rejection of violence. This last commonality would enable atheists and Buddhists and peace church people, for example, to cooperate in their opposition to a war, as happened during the Vietnam war, or to cooperate in programs to combat poverty or racism in North American cities. The temptation for the peace church is to allow the commonality of behavior to undercut the *Christ*ian orientation of the church's nonviolent commitment. Common to these four temptations is the moving to the periphery of an intrinsic element of Christus Victor. The first three surrender nonviolence in the name of a supposedly greater Christian unity. The fourth surrenders the ultimacy of Jesus Christ in the name of a supposedly greater humanitarian, ethical concern.

At times, the uniqueness of the peace church, the difference between it and the story of Christian rationalization of violence or a nonChristian story, may not be fully apparent until the failure of dialogue or the failure of a common striving for peace. As noted, peace church people and people from a nonChristian religious tradition, for very different reasons, might cooperate on a peace or justice project. Since Christians in the tradition of rationalized violence acknowledge the use of violence as a last resort, nonviolent Christians can affirm much that they cherish in common and might cooperate with them in a variety of peace and justice activities. It is when such dialogues or such shared activities fail that their foundational differences may emerge. While the other stories may drop the dialogue or the commitment or may determine that the time has finally come to exercise the supposed last resort, namely violence, those shaped by the nonviolent narrative or trajectory of Jesus will maintain their nonviolent gospel because it is intrinsic to who they are.[44]

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[44]On this point, I part company with Leslie Newbigin's otherwise very helpful statement about the universal nature of the particular truth of Jesus Christ in a pluralistic world. Much of Newbigin's book supports or is parallel to the second section of the essay in hand. However, after maintaining the truth of the particularity of Jesus throughout the book, Newbigin seems to give some of that truth away in his application of the fact that the gospel is both enculturated and a critic of culture. On the question of church and social responsibility, Newbigin writes: "Christian discipleship can never be all homeliness nor all heroism. It has to have elements of both and it has to learn from day to day when to accept the

Given the intrinsically nonviolent character of the narrative, Christus Victor theology makes "Christian triumphalism" an oxymoron. The church as a minority, nonviolent movement cannot be triumphalist. A "triumphalist" Christianity is one that has abandoned its location within the narrative of Jesus and has adopted the means of emperor and empire. The rejection of triumphalism means that the church should clearly critique past sins of linking the gospel to imperialistic expansion. Recent Mennonite historiography has made clear that in spite of their professions of nonviolence, Mennonites on the frontier did benefit from the repression of Native Americans and did link their mission efforts in part to frontier expansion.[45] The guilt of our historic complicity should remind us to be sensitive to justice issues now. Even harder, it should also remind us to be concerned for oppressors as well as the oppressed, and to pursue solutions which envision the restoration of all sides of a conflict.

Christus Victor theology means further that dialogue between or among the various traditions and religions must be precisely that, namely dialogue. Mission must be essentially a dialogue in which Christians genuinely listen as well as witness. Even when

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homely duties of life as it is, and when to take the heroic road of questioning and challenging the accepted ways. It was necessary for the early church, at crucial moments, to take the heroic path and to accept martyrdom rather than submit to what the vast majority of people took for granted. But it was also right that, when the time came with the conversion of Constantine, the Church should accept the role of sustainer and cherisher of the political order. It is right for the churches to be dissenting communities challenging accepted norms and structures. It is right also in other circumstances for the Church to be the church for the nation or the parish, the cherisher and sustainer of the ordinary work of the farmer, the judge, and the soldier. What is wrong is the absolutizing of one position against the other and the corresponding ex-communication of those who take the other role. What is needed is the discernment to know, from day to day and from issue to issue, when the one stance is appropriate and when the other." [Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 195-96.] In spite of his desire throughout the book to make the narrative of Jesus the norm of truth, in this statement Newbigin is nonetheless adjusting the ethic of the church according to the exigencies of the social order rather than the narrative of Jesus.

[45]Richard K. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683-1790*, The Mennonite Experience in America, vol. 1 (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1984), 111-37; Theron F. Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America*, The Mennonite Experience in America, vol. 2 (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1988), 23-26, 36-37, 41-42, 287-88; James C. Juhnke, "General Conference Mennonite Missions to the American Indians in the Late Nineteenth Century," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54 (April 1980): 117-134.

the gospel makes universal claims about Jesus, for the gospel to be genuinely accepted, it must be freely accepted. A freely accepted gospel happens from genuine dialogue, not from the moral equivalent of arm-twisting, not as the result of the best persuasion—read 'manipulative'—techniques as taught by modern advertising.

For a genuine dialogue to occur, the nonChristian religion must be allowed to maintain its own claim to ultimacy. That claim to ultimacy is undercut by the common assumption that each particular religion takes its meaning from a larger whole, common deity or wider experience of the divine, so that Christians should accept other religions without attempting to convert them, without presenting them with the unique claims of Jesus Christ. The claim to be able to identify that higher or greater unity "beyond" the particular religions is already a claim which undercuts the profession of each world religion to be a universal religion. It assumes access to some "higher" truth by which one can know that the supposedly ultimate religion is actually a penultimate form of something more ultimate.[46] The model of trajectories provides a way to envision a genuine dialogue which envisions some genuine commonality while nonetheless retaining each religion's own claims to ultimacy.

The narrative structure of Christus Victor, which makes the rejection of violence an intrinsic part of the story, and the image of trajectories, provide a way to deal with this complex of differences and commonalities. Using the model of trajectories, it is possible to understand how the peace church trajectory can have a point of intersection with another trajectory—whether doctrine, a specific experience, task, or behavior—but without having a common foundation. That point of commonality does provide an entry point for dialogue, but without implying that the occupants of the trajectories necessarily have a common foundation or should find similarity on other points. If this analysis is kept in mind, the intersection of trajectories does provide a model for understanding interaction and discussion and mutual enlightenment—without at the same time calling into

[46]The formulation at this point is shaped by George A. Lindbeck's critique of what he called the "experiential-expressive" view of doctrine throughout his *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); John H. Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, In.: U. of Notre Dame, 1984), 46-62; for a similar argument, see Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 155-70.

question the uniqueness of the Christocentric peace church tradition.

Since the trajectories are all within reality, without an objective platform from which to compare them, we are faced with the fact that no objective criteria can establish one trajectory over another. At the same time, there is what George Lindbeck called subjective certitude. When one lives and works within a tradition—a trajectory—eventually one does sense that it answers questions about the human condition. The theologian can compare those answers to the answers supplied by other traditions or trajectories. Sometimes, an objective component does enter in. The modern scientific world view, for example, does invalidate what are called primitive religions.[47] Among the more universal religious traditions, it is possible to develop a certain subjective confidence in a religion—analogous to the way an expert musicologist might explain why a Beethoven symphony is a better musical work than a recent hard rock composition, even though rock speaks to many people and is the preferred music for a significant portion of the population who know nothing about Beethoven. Thus Christian truth—a narrative christology of Jesus the bearer of the reign of God—is not left speechless when confronted with other Christian traditions and with other religions of the world.

For Christian faith as understood in terms of historicized Christus Victor, one dimension of that "speech" is lived faith, a demonstration that new life in Christ really exists in history. If the narrative of Jesus makes the reign of God visible in history, and if Christian believers continue to testify to the presence of the reign of God in history, the truth of those claims and of that narrative is given validity and credibility by the presence of nonviolent communities in which human alienation is overcome and in which men and women may experience the peaceable reign of God. In the final analysis, the truth of a claim about the reign of God in history is validated not by rational argument nor scientific proof nor superior force but by the presence in history of people and of communities shaped by the claims.

Although we are clearly not making the case here, I would argue that it is possible to develop as much subjective certainty for the narrative christology of Jesus the bearer of reign of God as it is for any other religious tradition. That is the faith statement that one must make if one truly believes that Jesus is Lord. At the

[47]Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 131.

same time, the fact that certainty is "only" subjective both enables and requires dialogue at the intersection of trajectories to be genuine dialogue. Triumphalism, based on a claimed objective certainty, is what turns into monologue.

III. Conclusion

My intent in this essay was to describe a particular theology which would reflect the ecclesiology of the believers church and which would also understand nonviolence as intrinsic to christology, salvation and the gospel. This theology can engage in genuine dialogue with other religions without losing track of its own witness to Jesus Christ as ultimate norm of truth. It is a theology which counters the kind of Christian theology which has for so long supported so much of the violence endemic to western civilization. While my approach poses a different kind of answer than does Gordon Kaufman, our efforts merge in their intent. It is my prayer that this conversation concerning ways to develop a theology which confronts the violence and destruction of the modern world may influence Christians in general to question the North American love affair with violence, and may stimulate Mennonites in particular to have the courage to see the intrinsically nonviolent nature of Christian faith and to resist a continuing slide into the North American version of rationalized violence.

Chapter 11

Relativity, Normativity, and Imagination

Thomas Finger

Many important clues to a theologian's deepest concerns can often be gleaned from that person's first published book. Despite the expansions and alterations which inevitably emerge over subsequent decades, an author's initial volume often yields invaluable insight into his or her most fundamental interests and assumptions. My own appreciation of where Gordon Kaufman is "coming from" has been greatly enhanced by reading his 1960 publication, *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* (a somewhat simplified version of his Yale doctoral dissertation), especially regarding his crucial emphases on relativism and imaginative construction. For this reason, I think that an essay focusing on this volume should illumine several of his underlying concerns and presuppositions.[1]

Yet even if this volume helped little towards understanding Kaufman's long-term interests, interaction with it would be fruitful today. For the issues it raises have increasingly occupied theological discussion's foreground over the last 35 years. Until the early 1970s, Kaufman wrote under neo-Orthodoxy's long shadow. Significant epistemological questions as to how God—or anything else—is known could be bypassed, or supplied with ready solutions. Kaufman increasingly articulated his task as one of raising such epistemological and methodological issues.[2]

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[1]Numerous references to this volume, recommended as an elaboration of the author's basic views, appear in Kaufman's *Systematic Theology: an historicist perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968; see notes to pp. xiv, 4, 14, 20, 24, 25, 118, 316, and 339). Then in his *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1972), he says of his first book: "Though I now regard many of the details of the argument presented there as unsophisticated and unconvincing, I still think its main contentions are substantially correct." (204n). *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* is also cited on page 89 of this volume, and once in *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981; see note to p. 245 on p. 302). This was Kaufman's last published reference to it, so far as I know (I failed to find references in his *An Essay on Theological Method* [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975], *Theology for a Nuclear Age* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985], and *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* [Cambridge: Harvard, 1993]). In interpreting this first volume, we will find reasons for regarding its substantial concerns as expressive of Kaufman's continuing views, as he said in *God the Problem*, but will avoid basing interpretation or critique of it on its details.

[2]See, e.g., the appreciation of neo-Orthodoxy and the careful appraisal of its limitations in *God the Problem*, pp. 3-7.

Today, many of these have become the chief ones regarding the character, and even the possibility, of Christian theology. This 1960 effort, that is, is enough "on target" to stimulate significant discussion about theology's foundations today.

I will begin by describing the basic problem of relativism, and Kaufman's interesting and helpful approach to it in *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith.* Next, I will discuss the genetic epistemology by which he attempts to solve this problem, and his influential notion of imaginative construction, which emerges in this context. Third, I will show how Kaufman seeks to account for the normative claims made by most epistemologies, relativistic and otherwise. Here I shall ask what his 1960 affirmation of relativism might really mean today. Finally, I will ponder the role that some notion of normativity, or ultimacy, might have in current theologizing from a Mennonite perspective.

I. The Problem of Relativism

Most people today are aware of relativism in some basic sense. The increasing pluralism of contemporary experience, which penetrates even the few remaining homogeneous communities through media and education, shows clearly that people in different cultures hold different views on ethical, religious, and other significant issues. Some of these viewpoints seem contradictory. In *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith,* Gordon Kaufman emphasized that historical awareness also raises the relativism problem. Today, he said, we realize that incompatible philosophical systems and cultural orientations have repeatedly succeeded each other, with each claiming an absolute, exclusive validity. Currently, Kaufman would doubtless agree that not only different cultures, but also racial, economic, and gender groups within the same cultures, make apparently incompatible value- and knowledge-claims.

Yet, while empirical evidence of pluralism abounds in our present world and our history, it is extremely difficult to state a relativistic position coherently. This is largely because relativistic claims generally seem self-contradictory. Take, for example, several statements from Kaufman's own first volume—examples of whose problematic character he was then fully aware. Kaufman affirmed, for instance, that "no truth which anyone has ever known has been absolute, though it may well have been

valid for its time, its historical situation."[3] The apparent problem with this statement is that its central claim itself is absolute: that no known truth has been ever been absolute. But claims like these, Kaufman says, have difficulty accounting for themselves as knowledge. For they "presuppose the very concept of objective validity which they allegedly destroy, and without such presupposition they lose all meaning." (9) If such statements are not claiming objective validity, he goes on to say, we can disregard them. But if they are claiming it, then they are treating themselves—inconsistently—as exceptions to the very claim they are making.

Kaufman includes universal ethical, or "ought," statements among the important affirmations which relativists, like others, often make. He himself makes many, such as: "the search for truth demands of us that we go beyond any and all parochial interests, and the claim of truth is that it somehow has gone beyond the particular and the arbitrary to the universal and valid." (66-67) Here again is an affirmation which apparently asserts something as absolutely and objectively true: if this is not meant, we can disregard it; if it is meant, it seems to contradict any relativist stance.

I would state the problem of relativism somewhat differently, though I think compatibly, with Kaufman. I would argue that in much of our thought and language, especially in fields like theology, we are actually making universal, normative affirmations quite often. The logical structure underlying our reasoning patterns, for instance, frequently asserts that something is true of "all" or "no" instances or arguments. Certain universal, normative affirmations, that is, actually underlie our thought patterns, and are basic conditions of our being able to think and speak coherently at all. They are simply there, though perhaps almost invisibly, as intrinsic characteristics of human thought, whether we are aware of them or not. Even the reasoning involved in attempting to deny such universal normativity affirms it.[4] We will further explore how Kaufman generally affirms this too. Yet while my emphasis would be that these considerations point to the presence of some universal norms in knowledge,

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[3]*Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* (Chicago: University, 1960), 119. All remaining page references in this article are to this volume.

[4]Kaufman, for instance, assumes that his genetic account of knowledge (Section II below) holds for all acquisition of all kinds of knowledge in every culture. Thus this very case which he makes for the relativity of knowledge assumes that knowledge has a great many universal characteristics.

Kaufman supports relativism. How can this be? Section III will investigate this matter and ask how different Kaufman's position really is from mine.

Kaufman commences his support of relativism with an interesting distinction between *external* and *internal relativism.* External relativism is based on descriptive analyses of anthropological, psychological, and other data showing that views of truth and value vary widely in differing cultures. Yet such description of what *is* the case can never settle questions of truth and value, for the latter are also based on what *ought to be* the case (14). Thus Kaufman finds external relativism, in its attempt to derive is from ought, lacking.

Internal relativism, however, occupies a quite different standpoint. It results from a person's attempt to get inside other cultures or thought-systems until one can actually relive or re-experience its sense of truth and value from within. Through this approach, one can actually experience different norms "as *norms,* i.e., *in terms of their very normativeness.*" (15) Internal relativism, that is, arises not from descriptive or theoretical argument, but from actually experiencing different norms as binding upon oneself. In our pluralistic world, such a deep kind of empathy seems desirable as a scholarly approach—and indeed as a general Christian attitude. Beyond this, Kaufman argues, it must function as an epistemological norm. "For the only norms which we can know . . . are those which we subjectively experience as normative for us." To ask whether these are "*really*" norms is to ask for something unavailable to us, some kind of impossible "'Norm-in-itself' beyond all experience."[5] Contemporary experience itself, then, seems to support relativism.

Having described what he regards as the real problem of relativism, Kaufman critiques normative theories for ignoring the empirical, situational features involved in actual acquisition of knowledge. He claims that they focus almost exclusively on abstract, logical standards (8, 27). In contrast, he proposes to buttress internal relativism by developing a genetic account of the knowing process which will show that non-rational factors are intrinsic in the very search for truth. This endeavor must, on the one hand, "show how thought is bound to the concrete situation in which it emerges," and yields relativistic results. Yet it must,

[5]Ibid., 20; cf. p. 85: "the only way we can actually find out whether the argument with which we are dealing is cogent is to learn how to argue that way ourselves and see. Thus, we must, in the last analysis, trust our own subjective certitude about what is true."

on the other hand, "do justice to the normative character of knowledge," and "account for its own existence without falling into logical and epistemological absurdity." (22)

II. The Genesis and Growth of Knowledge

Gordon Kaufman's early epistemology not only yields valuable insight into his understanding and defense of relativism. It also lays the foundations of his notion of imaginative construction. While we cannot be too critical of this initial effort's details, we will interact with the broad assumptions underlying this latter theme.

Given Kaufman's insistence that epistemological norms be "those which we subjectively experience as normative for us", it is hardly surprising that his theory is an empirical one; he often contrasts it with the speculative nature of rationalistic approaches. Yet he acknowledges that his reconstruction of the knowing process is hypothetical (28). He posits a primordial experiential stage, *Erleben*, which he describes as an infantile phase of "undifferentiated flux" (40), of hearing "one continuous noise or buzz." (48) By definition, *Erleben* cannot be known; it is "presupposed as that out of which the distinction between subject and object"—which "is the very presupposition of all knowledge"—"can emerge into consciousness." (33) Thus Kaufman's empirical approach contains non-empirical constructs, less visible than those normative principles which, according to my argument above, can be shown to be operating in current cognitive activities.

Since *Erleben* is "completely undifferentiated in every respect" (39), knowledge can only arise when *attention* focuses on and separates out certain features of the flux, "transforming that to which we attend." Objects of knowledge will not arise, however, until present features are also connected with the *memory* of past ones. This will not occur until *imagination* transforms current *sensa* "into something no longer subject to the constant movement of time." All this means that the most rudimentary acquisition of knowledge "involves construction on the part of the subject." Neither knowledge nor the external world are "simply 'given' as such to us." (40) Kaufman finds that object awareness differs radically from subject awareness, for objects are encountered only in opposition to the subject's strivings. The concepts of cause and substance, for instance, are derived from the subject's awareness of its agential acts (36). In short, all our thinking about objects

over against us is constructed through "analogies with our self-experience" (34), and is inevitably anthropomorphic.[6]

From the most rudimentary stage of knowledge, which involves a quite unthematized subject distinguished from a few objects, attention, memory, and imagination continue to build higher and higher levels.[7] Each of these is constructed from clues provided by lower ones. Yet due to humankind's inherent freedom, imaginative creativity plays a significant role in combining these clues. These levels become stabilized as each individual's experience progresses, and all individual experience is shaped by solidified cultural experience, communicated through language. The freedom involved in these processes explains how individuals, and indeed whole cultural eras, can perceive the world quite differently, and can also err (45). Though cultural thought patterns seem unquestionable to most who are shaped by them, historical studies show how each is constructed in contingent ways, and demonstrate differences among them. Kaufman thus concludes that

> Thinking is relative because the thinker himself (in the very structure of his consciousness), the system of meanings and the concepts with which he does his thinking, and the problems to which he directs his thinking—all are relative to the historical and psychological situation (63).

This affirmation of relativism, we have seen, relies in part on the claim that no one ever perceives a common, objective world directly, apart from *imagination's* constructive activity. Imagination, indeed, "is not something contrasted with reality" but "the indispensable constructive activity through which" the world attains any knowable structure at all (44). The only level

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[6]Ibid., 38. Kaufman does acknowledge that a somewhat more direct knowledge of other persons is eventually attainable (55-59) and expands this in *God the Problem*, xiii-xv. He attributes the general theory that the world is known through analogies to our subjective experience to R. C. Collingwood. Similar references to Collingwood (who often appears in the footnotes of Kaufman's work) appear in *Systematic Theology*, p. 259 and p. 343n.

[7]Kaufman mentions, in the experiencing of a rainbow, the levels of (I) *Erleben*, where no such thing is present; (ii) consciousness (somewhat above mere distinction between subject and object) where colors in a pattern are perceived; (iii) consciousness shaped by a particular set of cultural meanings, where one can say one "sees a rainbow"; (iv) interpretation of perception, where we say a rainbow is "really" rain and sunshine; and (v) metaphysics, where one asks whether a rainbow "is really there?"

which Kaufman contrasts with imaginatively constructed knowledge, *Erleben*, is completely unknowable. While it would be unfair to critique the details of this early epistemology, a general response to it becomes possible when we recognize that it draws upon certain well-known thinkers. To substantiate his view that infants are caught up in *Erleben*'s undifferentiatedness, Kaufman appealed to Jean Piaget's claim that they do not perceive objects as independent realities over against them for nearly a year.[8] Most significantly, however, Kaufman is indebted to Immanuel Kant.

While Kant insisted that an empirical givenness plays a role in knowledge, this empirical element was virtually formless, like Kaufman's *Erleben*. According to Kant, sense-perception considered by itself is a chaotic blur. Color, sound, heat, and other "secondary characteristics" are not properties of perceived objects, but of the subject's perceiving structure. The shape of objects, their organization into spatial and temporal relationships, even the intensity with which sensations affect one—all are determined by mental structures.[9] Kant also regarded *imagination* as one of the mind's key functions, for imagination could unite the mind's purely rational categories with sensory appearances. Yet for him this word carried far less of the personal, creative connotations that contemporary people in general and Kaufman in particular attribute to it. For Kant, *imagination* worked in a uniform manner in all minds by producing "rules," or *schemata*, for applying rational categories to sensations.[10]

Despite any revisions Kaufman might make in his 1960 epistemology, a basic Kantian perspective underlies later claims which are typical of him: e.g., "we never perceive objects immediately, uninterpreted by a conceptual framework created by the human imagination;" or "the only 'reality' or 'truth' available to us will be the product of the mind's powers of imaginative construction."[11] Such a position would be generally supported by Piaget, who propounded what psychologists today often call *enrichment theory*: the view that information provided by

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[8]Ibid., 31n4. Kaufman cites Piaget's *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1954), Chapter 1.

[9]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: St. Martin's, 1965), 194-244.

[10]Ibid., 180-183.

[11]*An Essay on Theological Method*, 23, 32. Cf. *The Theological Imagination*, 22: "From Kant onward it has been understood that even the simplest experiences of objects are possible for us only because of the elaborate synthesizing powers of the mind."

sensory receptors is fragmented and confusing, so that the subject must add to, or "enrich," it for it to make sense.[12]

Since 1960, however, the bulk of psychological research on early perception has supported *differentiation theory*, the view that "all the information we need is 'out there' in the stimulation we receive," so that the perceiver's task is to detect differences that are present all the time.[13] Research shows that all one's senses are functioning even in the womb, and operate in an integrated way at birth. Newborns detect changes in brightness, distinguish colors, and perceive patterns that are not too finely detailed. They are attracted to contours, movement, and moderately complex patterns. Newborns can hear well, localizing sounds at birth, and discriminating among voices, and between music and non-rhythmic noise, very soon after. Their taste and smell are also well developed. Other basic capacities develop very quickly. By three weeks infants respond to 3-dimensional patterns. They are organizing things by Gestalt principles at 3-4 months, and develop size constancy at 4-5 months. Significantly for theories of cultural relativity, infants from different cultures differ only rarely in these capacities.

Such research, of course, cannot solve, and does not even address, all issues connected with imaginative theological construction. But it does tend to temper Kaufman's claim that humans never have access to a world which is not their own imaginative configuration. It suggests that people in all cultures are initially aware of a common world which appears much the same to almost everyone in some of its basic features. Whenever narrative—stories involving ordinary humans in this world—is at the heart of a religious tradition, this suggests that most people in most cultures might understand some of that narrative's basic features in roughly the same way. To be sure, they may differ over many other points connected with the narrative—such as whether it actually happened historically, what its major ethical implications are, and whether the religious claims drawn from it are true. Creative imagination will indeed be involved in elaborating theological systems to deal with such issues.

A reading of *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith*, then, shows that the all-encompassing role which Kaufman typically gives to constructive imagination (e.g., theology "must be viewed as

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[12]Carol Sigelman and David Shaffer, *Life-Span Human Development*, 2nd ed. (Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole, 1995), 146.

[13]Ibid., 147. The following overview is taken from pp. 147-159 of Sigelman and Shaffer, which provides a typical contemporary account of infant perception.

imaginative construction through and through"[14]) is connected with an epistemology which makes no room for a somewhat common world being more or less directly accessible, even at the earliest stages, to different persons in different cultures.[15] It also shows that this epistemology, while intending to be a genetic one, makes claims about early perception which are non-empirical (since *Erleben* can never be known) and challenged by recent psychological research. While affirming some access to a common world would hardly solve all issues of relativism, it would make people a little less isolated from birth, instead of everyone living inside variously constructed personal and cultural boxes. It would provide modest support for the hope that people from different cultures might eventually reach some agreement about significant features of our world and human life.

III. The Normative Characteristics of Knowledge

In *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith*, Gordon Kaufman set himself two major tasks. The first, which we just examined, was to show, through a genetic account, how thought, by being bound to concrete situations, is relativistic. The second was to indicate how thought nonetheless makes normative claims. In pursuing the second task, Kaufman sought to answer the most common charge against relativism: that it is self-contradictory, and thus cannot account for itself as knowledge (cf. Section I above).

In responding, Kaufman again turned to Kant; this time to Kant's theory that three main concepts—self, world, and God—do

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[14]*The Theological Imagination*, 16. I recognize, of course, that by "imagination" Kaufman does not mean sheer subjective fantasy. He often emphasizes the importance of finding critical criteria for construction and insists that imaginative theological constructs must refer to what religious persons regard as real (e.g., *An Essay on Theological Method*, 32, 48).

[15]One might also ask whether the insistence that *all* theological work is imaginative construction is significant unless some other kind of possible approach can be identified and explicated. The same can be said for Kaufman's repeated emphasis on theologies being only ours, being only "human work" (e.g., *The Theological Imagination*, 263, 274; *Theology for a Nuclear Age*, 19). What is the significance of such assertions unless an alternative kind of theology (presumably one regarded as directly "God's work") can be described and critiqued? Otherwise, such affirmations remain mere truisms. Kaufman, of course, feels that he is criticizing important, common trends in theology. But unless the claims of those who allegedly practice them are explicated and countered, Kaufman's charges are simply aimed at stereotypes. Most of Kaufman's critical descriptions of traditional views remain at this very general level, seldom dealing with specific theologians or claims.

not represent external objects, but are *regulative Ideas*.[16] The world, for instance, is the concept of all events in the universe joined together in a harmonious causal system. Yet humans never know everything about all these events and their causal connections. Accordingly, Kant said, this concept functions not as an object of knowledge, not as a representation of something which is known, but instead as an ideal towards which knowledge aims. In other words, the Idea of "world" operates as an imperative: as a directive to keep on investigating and joining together as many phenomena within the world as possible. But since this task will never be complete, the Idea of world will never be filled in, as it were. It will always function as a directive to keep working towards that (unreachable) end. Similarly, the concept of God does not represent a distinct being over against the world, but the supreme union of all that is thinkable. "God" functions as an imperative to keep up the endless task of unifying all our thoughts.[17]

Throughout his career, Kaufman has made heavy use of the Ideas of world and God, and of the fact that Kant ascribed their construction, in part, to the imagination.[18] He acknowledges, however, that Kant only thought of "the world" as a second-order construction, and did not arrive at his own further position "that the constructed worlds of different subjects (or different communities, or different epochs) are not one and identical . . .

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[16]*Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 315-326.

[17]Note the quotation from Kant with which Kaufman prefaced *An Essay on Theological Method*: "The transcendental idea of a necessary and all-sufficient original being is so overwhelmingly great, so high above everything empirical, the latter always being conditioned, that it leaves us at a loss, partly because we can never find in experience material sufficient to satisfy such a concept, and partly because it is always in the sphere of the conditioned that we carry out our search, seeking there ever vainly for the unconditioned—no law of empirical synthesis giving us an example of any such unconditioned or providing the least guidance in its pursuit." (vii) Kaufman also prefaced *The Theological Imagination* with a Kant quote:

> Though it does indeed sound dangerous, it is in no way reprehensible to say that every man creates God for himself, nay, must make himself such a God . . . in order to honor in Him the One who created him. (9)

[18]"The importance of Kant was his discovery that the concepts or images of God and the world are imaginative constructs, created by the mind for certain intra-mental functions, and thus of a different logical order than the concepts and images which we have of the objects of experience." (*An Essay on Theological Method*, 22-23; cf. *The Theological Imagination*, 242-244).

but themselves differ significantly."[19] Again we see that Kaufman envisions imagination operating more diversely in different contexts than did Kant. Kant's God-concept also underlies Kaufman's increasing insistence that theologians not regard "God" as a distinct being of whom they can have direct information (through Scripture, tradition, etc.), but as an imaginative construct built up from numerous cultural sources.

Turning back to Kaufman's 1960 effort, we find him prepared to show how thought, in his relativistic view, has validity: that is, that it goes "beyond any and all parochial interests . . . to the universal" and that it "is clearly something other than accordance with our wishes and desires, and it always stands in judgment over the pragmatic element or 'roots.'" These are discoverable, however, not by searching for eternal principles prior to actual thinking, but only through reflecting on what has occurred in the process of thought (76).[20]

Validity's first "root" is *givenness*, or objectivity: the mind's sense of being compelled by something which stands over against it, which it does not freely create (67). Kaufman claims that givenness is initially the characteristic of *Erleben*, for what is experienced at this level is simply, undeniably, there; no question can arise as to whether it really exists or not. He then argues that this sense of givenness, this demand for unconditional adequacy between thought and its object, is transferred to successively higher levels of thought as they arise (69-71).

Validity's second root, *universality*, emerges as thought, not only as it advances "upward" to new levels, but also as it radiates "outward" to encompass increasingly wider ranges of objects. Universality arises for individuals when communal experience becomes an additional source of data, and a standard by which to measure their private thoughts. The ideal of universality can incorporate the experiences and thoughts of more and more cultures, until it spreads to "the whole human species." (73) For knowing always searches for increasingly wider universals, pressing beyond any present boundaries (74).

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[19]*God the Problem*, 203. In *The Theological Imagination*, Kaufman calls his view of "The historical and cultural relativity of metaphysical work" one which "a modified version of Kant's interpretation of the indispensable role of regulative ideals renders intelligible " and refers to *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* for fuller discussion (302).

[20]We can never "perceive or formulate laws of thought more universal than those which are effective in our own concrete thinking because we have no other thinking at our disposal to investigate." (*Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith*, 83)

Finally, validity's third root, and thought's most general activity, is *logical interconnectedness*, or the unifying of various parts into a single whole. "The final standard or criterion of thought, which stands behind every particular act, is the ideal of the complete unification of all the contents of consciousness." (82) The similarity of this norm, like that of *universality*, to Kant's Idea of "God" is evident. Yet it is a dynamic norm, for we can never unite all our thoughts and experiences—and even if we succeeded for one instant, subsequent thoughts and experiences would renew the challenge. This ideal of *logical interconnectedness*, then (like "God"), always transcends and judges every attempt to attain it (79).

Kaufman concludes that since his brand of relativism acknowledges these three conditions of validity, it can therefore account for thought's normative characteristics. He apparently means that when he affirms anything, even something like "no truth which anyone has ever known has been absolute" (119), he does not simply assert it without regard for other kinds of truth claims, nor merely on the basis of descriptive differences among cultures (*external relativism*). Kaufman apparently means that he is committed to testing the *universality* of any statement, and its *logical interconnectedness* with all other statements. Presumably, then, failure of any statement to meet either criterion could lead to its revision or abandonment.

But what should we call such an epistemology? Due to its emphasis on normative standards, might one identify it as normative, or even "absolute?" Some of Kaufman's affirmations might lead one to think so. He insists that we "must" adhere to the path described by these norms to be thinking at all (83-84). These criteria, in fact, are "'functional absolutes'." We must even "stake our existence on them." And this implies "a faith that they are somehow rooted in what is ultimately real, beyond all illusion." Even "the most radical doubter" actually lives by this faith.[21]

Nonetheless, Kaufman continues to call his position relativism. One reason is that its norms describe only knowing's finished product, whereas actual thought is always concrete (78), always moving on, never actually complete. Further, even though we cannot live without such criteria, they cannot be absolute in the

[21]Ibid., 86. "We thus inevitably (if often unconsciously) premise our every action and thought on the conviction (perhaps unprovable, yet nevertheless inescapable) that our knowledge somehow participates in that which transcends the relativities of our situation."

timeless sense, for we can still work at refining and redefining them (86). Finally, even though such criteria "are normative and inescapable for us," we cannot be sure "that they are normative for everyone in every situation." Kaufman concludes that "the criteria of all thought are ultimately subjective" (84), and that "we must, in the last analysis, trust our own subjective certitude about what is true." (85).

Still, since Kaufman strongly stresses both thought's normative and relativistic features, I want to ask what might be the best way of characterizing, at least in 1995, the claims he makes about the former, with which I largely agree. While he talks of being able subjectively to experience contradictory norms *as norms*, Kaufman also insists that thought as active (as guided by *universality* and *logical interconnectedness*) always presses towards some kind of reconciliation among their claims. Thought, it seems, is largely future-oriented. In its deepest active character, it continually moves towards embracing the universe as a unified whole in which all contradictions are overcome. Thought, I would say, seems to be eschatologically directed: it seems to have ultimate criteria which, even though they may "not yet" be fully specifiable, "already" operate as eschatological goals in the present.

Since this is so, I find it meaningful to stress that thought is normative, so long as this normativity is understood as a *goal*. Thought is a dynamism guided by *intentions* towards universal norms, norms so fundamental that without them the actual process of thinking, even though it never definitively reaches them, would not even occur. It is true, of course, as Kaufman says, that any of thought's norms, in light of further reflection, new phenomena, or encounter with other cultures, might come to be more adequately formulated. Certainly no one *verbal formulation* of any of these norms is absolute or eternal. Yet I do not find that this undercuts a strong emphasis on thought's universal, normative dynamism; for it is thought's very universality and normativity which underlie this dynamism towards ever more precise formulations.

Finally, even if such norms might somehow fail to hold "for everyone in every situation" (84), it seems that the only process by which we could determine this would presuppose these norms. For our best efforts at this would have to include, it seems, some kind of "conversation" among persons from very

different cultures.[22] Yet such conversations presuppose that the participants already share a few common convictions (for if they agreed on nothing, conversation could not begin). They also presuppose that anyone who makes a statement must be open to examining its truth in light of deeper and wider grounds, and that all are committed to revising their utterances in light of such grounds—and ultimately in light of grounds acceptable to everyone, if such can be found.[23] If this is so, it seems that conversation, even among people of the most diverse persuasions, would not be possible unless it were undergirded (though perhaps unconsciously) by *intentions* like those towards universality and interconnectedness which Kaufman describes.[24] Even in this situation, then, ultimate norms prove to be very real—yet as *eschatological,* as something not yet fully understood or realized, but in light of which we must now act if present reality is to have a desired character.

I would question, however, whether such norms should be called "ultimately subjective." To be sure, I cannot know about any such norms unless I subjectively apprehend them. But calling them "subjective" usually means that their roots, their being, lies in one's subjectivity. I would argue, in contrast, that thought's norms are actually visible in many of the ways that we already think and discuss. They are already present, and operating, before we become aware of them. My main way of showing this would be to examine significant stretches of conversation or thought, and seek to show that these norms are actually being presupposed, and actually functioning, as this thought or

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[22]In any effort to define or discover more adequate criteria of thought, such conversation would have to take place at least through wrestling with writings from different cultures, but ideally through verbal dialogue among their proponents. Kaufman envisions his *In Face of Mystery* as such a conversation (64-69). Like many who emphasize "conversation," however, Kaufman pictures the open dialogue which would hopefully result mostly as the opposite of the rigidity that would allegedly follow from any normative approach.

[23]Such conversations also presuppose normative ethical commitments. Authentic conversation is possible only where all participants are regarded as of equal worth: where everyone has an equal right to express their own views and be fairly heard. But to regard all humans as of equal worth is to make an ethical judgment, or decision, about the ultimate value of *everyone* (or at least about the importance of equal participation among *all people*).

[24]An approach to conversation something like this, which is quite unlike Kaufman's in *In Face of Mystery* (note 23 above), has been developed by Jürgen Habermas (see. e.g., Stephen White, *The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas* [New York: Cambridge, 1988], esp. 22-24, 48-65; and Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1988], 182-197).

discussion moves on. This gives them an "objectivity" which I would not call "subjective." To be sure, we can only know those norms "which we subjectively experience as normative for us." (20) But when we subjectively experience them, we become aware of a dynamism which has been guiding us, and will continue to guide us, despite any unawareness of it.

Kaufman and I agree, I think, that current thought-systems and cultures evidence many apparent contradictions, and yet that thought's dynamism works towards overcoming these. But in a world where misunderstanding and disagreement, not to mention hostility and warfare, divide persons, cultures, and nations on so many fronts, which should one stress? Kaufman, it seems to me, stresses chiefly that thought is relative. I would want to emphasize more strongly that thought always, in its dynamism, its intention, its hope, strives towards agreement and common understanding—and their practical fruit, co-operative ethical action. It seems to me that Kaufman's first book helpfully argues that knowledge is normative in this sense—in its dynamic intentionality. In 1995, I would lay greater stress on the hope that this can arouse for common understanding than on the apparent contradictions that our pluralistic world often presents.

Corresponding with Kaufman's approach in his first book, I have discussed relativity, normativity, and imaginative construction philosophically to this point. But my arguments so far do not give my deepest reasons for hoping that peoples of the world have access to some common world (Section II above) or to meaningful conversation. (I regard philosophically based hope, by itself, as very tenuous). My deepest reasons are connected with an issue now confronting many Christians in general, and many Mennonites in particular: the ultimate normativity of Jesus Christ, especially in light of today's religious pluralism.

Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith erects the following framework for dealing with this issue. The personal drive towards meaning, like the drive towards knowledge, seeks to bring all experiences into a unified whole. All persons, that is, seek a single basic meaning in life (100). This meaning is found especially in central historical events which illumine the meaning of the whole. Everyone commits themselves, in some way, to the meaning revealed at some such center, trusting that future events will bear it out (107-109).

This general life-structure allows a place for Jesus. Christians commit themselves to the events surrounding his life as those which form history's center, trusting that they are committing themselves to the Lord of history, who will continue to give

history meaning, thus vindicating his Lordship eschatologically.[25] Despite Kaufman's emphasis on relativism, he never speaks as if humans could live meaningfully by shifting from meaning-center to meaning-center, or by attempting to commit themselves to something they regarded as only partially true. Instead, he stresses that no one can live meaningfully without firm commitment to some ultimate meaning in history.

IV. The Normativity of Jesus Christ?

Christianity's traditional assumption about Christ's normativity has been much critiqued of late. It is often charged with comprising a religious absolutism that fosters cultural and economic imperialism and oppression. John Hick complains that "Christian absolutism, in collaboration with acquisitive and violent human nature, has done much to poison the relationships between the Christian minority and the non-Christian majority of the world's population by sanctifying exploitation and oppression on a gigantic scale."[26] Marjorie Suchocki adds that "Absolutizing one religion, such that it becomes normative for all others, is a dynamic with clear parallels to sexism, where one gender is established as the norm for human existence."[27] Tom Driver agrees that "both sexism and racism are supported by the doctrine of a single, unique, unsurpassable Christ who has appeared 'once for all' in the past."[28] Many similar quotations could be cited.

In response to the accurate charge that the absolutism of Christianity as an organized religion has fostered such oppression, two basic avenues are open. One leads outside Christianity, to critiquing it on the basis of non-Christian religious or philosophical criteria. The other leads within, to criteria from the Christian tradition itself which condemn this oppression. The Anabaptists clearly took the second route.[29] For them, Jesus

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[25]*Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith*, 117, 124. For a fuller discussion, see *Systematic Theology*, 20-32, and esp. 339-342 in connection of this issue with relativism.

[26]In John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), 17.

[27]Ibid., 150.

[28]Ibid., 216.

[29]Although the first route, critiquing Christianity from outside, might result in affirming some elements of Christian tradition (as *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* does), from here on I am following and recommending what I regard as the Anabaptist approach, which begins from the specificity of divine revelation. For my differences with Kaufman on this point see my "Is 'Systematic Theology' Possible from a Mennonite Perspective?" in Willard Swartley, ed., *Explorations of*

Christ, including his specific teachings, example, and way of life, provided the ultimate norm for human living in every respect. Peace, sharing, and justice were at the heart of Jesus' normative way. As such, it provided a sharp critique of all situations where certain social, economic, or ethnic groups oppressed others. For this reason, Jesus' way appealed to oppressed, marginalized, and poor people much more often than to those holding power. The Anabaptists challenged the greatest powers of their day in the Name of Jesus and his way, and suffered the most horrible penalties in consequence.[30]

I regard Jesus, so understood, as the most foundational norm for theologizing in a Mennonite perspective. While Jesus' reality, of course, will hardly impact the post-resurrection world without the Christian community, I affirm that this Jesus gives shape to authentic communities, not that some notion of community shapes what we can affirm about Jesus. I also affirm that the full person Jesus Christ, including his divine reality, and not solely his human teaching, example, and way, provides the ultimate, or norm, for Mennonite theologizing. I agree with Alvin Beachy[31] that most Anabaptists understood salvation as "divinization," and that this was only possible through participation in the divine reality of Christ.[32] Only firm belief in and experience of this divine dimension, it seems, enabled many Anabaptists to endure the extreme persecution they suffered.

Systematic Theology (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 37-56.

[30]Kaufman often stresses Jesus as the norm for true "humanness" (e.g., *The Theological Imagination*, 45, 271). In *Systematic Theology* he emphasizes the "historical paradigm which is the church's final norm, the death of Jesus." (493) He regards "non-resistance" as a chief characteristic of both God (219-222) and the Church (493-496, cf. p. 510n).

[31]*The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop, the Netherlands: B. de Graaf, 1977).

[32]"Divinization," as I use the term, does not mean literally becoming God, but participation in divine energies. For my argument that this was a key Anabaptist theme, see my "Anabaptism and Eastern Orthodoxy: Some Unexpected Similarities?" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 31 (Winter-Spring 1994), esp. 76-83. For a fuller statement of my approach to Mennonite theologizing, see my "Is 'Systematic Theology' Possible," which interacts with Kaufman (37-39).

So understood, Jesus Christ functions as the ultimate[33] reality in the cosmos for Mennonite theologizing. Yet before raising protests about the usually oppressive function of ultimates (or "absolutes"), let us notice carefully what kind of ultimate Jesus Christ is. He is the one who became a servant, who poured himself out to death for the sake of humankind and the creation. He is one who identified with the humble and the downtrodden, who called for justice and sharing, and thereby implacably opposed the forces of pride, oppression, injustice, and inequality—whose inner logic, consequently, could only seek his death. In this light, the cosmic ultimacy, or Lordship, of Jesus Christ can only be understood as a *kenotic Lordship*—as one forever marked by the self-giving way, teaching, and example which led inescapably to his cross. This *kenosis*, however, cannot be restricted to his human life. For if it were, the human mind's restless probing, as Kaufman notes, would eventually ponder whether there existed some cosmic principle yet more ultimate than this. For this reason, if it is to provide a solid foundation for meaningful and challenging living, Jesus' *kenosis* must be regarded as rooted in eternity, and as the *kenosis* of God.

If Gordon Kaufman was right in his first book, people cannot live meaningfully without pressing towards, and finally committing themselves to, some value which they believe to be "rooted in what is ultimately real, beyond all illusion." (86) While I would not argue it in exactly Kaufman's way, I am inclined to affirm that people cannot really live meaningfully without firm commitment to some cosmic ultimate, even if they are not fully aware of this.[34] If this is so, what is the best way to live it in a religiously plural world threatened by the oppressive impact of many kinds of absolutism? To try to renounce all ultimates? Or

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[33]"Absolute" may be misleading here because it can imply (though it need not) that absolutely all reality is included in such a being. (I understand the affirmation that all things are "in him" [Col. 1:17, etc.] to mean that creatures who are distinctly different participate in some way in his energies, but do not share his "essence.") The term "norm" can be restricted to epistemological matters. For these reasons, I employ "ultimate" to refer to the priority of the overall living reality of Christ. The fact that Scripture also ascribes such ultimacy to Jesus' Father and Spirit does not negate Jesus' ultimacy, but demands that it be articulated more precisely in trinitarian terms (cf. my *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, Vol. II [Scottdale: Herald, 1989], 379-456).

[34]For fuller argumentation, see my "A Mennonite Theology for Interfaith Relations" (presented at the National Council of Churches of Christ Consultation, "Discovering Christian Resources for a Theology of Interfaith Relations," October 13-14, 1994.)

to live by one which relativizes all others, and radically critiques oppressive ones?

If we attempt the first, I fear that we shall really be living according to some ultimate value(s) anyway, but will be unable to critique them, precisely because we are unaware of the hold they have on us. The unexamined values which really do motivate us will most likely be imbibed from our own limited, relative culture, and therefore have some oppressive effects on persons from other cultures. If, on the other hand, we commit ourselves fully to Christ's kenotic Lordship, we will embrace—and be embraced by—an ultimate which can liberate us from all false and oppressive claims to ultimacy. Indeed, commitment to such an ultimate seems required to make rich, authentic cultural pluralism possible. Full, genuine pluralism cannot emerge unless the values of all cultures and systems are liberated from absolutist pretensions, and then restored to their proper place as finite—and often highly admirable—human values.[35] This needs to happen, at least as much as anywhere else, among all forms of Christian*ity*. Yet if, apart from Christ's kenotic Lordship, people will regard some such value(s) as more ultimate than they are, the fullest potentialities for pluralism will emerge only where authentic commitment to this Lordship is made.

I find Gordon Kaufman's *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* helpful in articulating the kind of ultimate commitment that I regard as appropriate amidst the 1990s' pluralism. He has helpfully insisted that since history keeps moving, and since there will always be more to discover and know, no one can be sure of stating their ultimate(s) or norm(s) in absolutely adequate final form. He has helped clarify the way in which an ultimate is eschatological—as a hope, an intention, that draws us towards ever fuller exploration and discovery of what is ultimately Real. He has made it clear how, in a world which is not only unfinished, but where much seems to contradict our ultimate value(s), we can only hold them by faith. Yet he has also shown that we cannot live by these values if we hold them as mere opinions, but only if we are fully committed to them as dimensions of the real.[36]

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[35]See Calvin Shenk, "The Gospel and Pluralism" (unpublished paper, February, 1990), discussed more fully in my "What are Mennonites Saying about Religious Pluralism?" *Mission Focus* 1 (1993), 33-38.

[36]Cf. his argument in *The Theological Imagination* that even relativists must have some point in reference to which all is relative, yet that this point cannot be directly available to us (92).

Initially, I understood many of Kaufman's exhortations about regarding our beliefs as "only ours", as mere "human constructions"—especially in the context of interfaith dialogue[37]—as reducing them too far towards mere opinions, which we could alter without really affecting our deepest selves. But if his view of ultimates is still much the same as it was in his first book, I will have to revise my estimate. I find this early discussion of the normative dimensions of knowledge and faith very helpful for interreligious dialogue today. To be sure, I would read our times as calling the Church to stress the "normative" dimension of our faith much more than Gordon does, and to stress the "relative" less. Nevertheless, I am glad to have found in *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* some help towards saying about normativity and relativism some things I have long been trying to say.

[37]E.g., his "Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology," in Hick and Knitter, eds., 3-15.

Towards an Appraisal of Constructive Theology

Chapter 12

Time, History, and Ethics

A. James Reimer

Gordon Kaufman, unlike some of his Mennonite contemporaries with whom he might be compared, has evolved and changed considerably in his thinking over the years.[1] This is most evident in his later discomfort with the traditional notions of authority and revelation that he used in his earlier theological work.[2] There is one aspect of his theology, however, which has remained central from the start. It is his view of 'time as history,' and his rejection of the pre-modern understanding of time as taking on significance only in relation to the Eternal.[3] The Eternal, in classical understanding, is that which is not temporal but is beyond time, and provides the context for time and history. In the traditional Christian (including the biblical) perspective, time and history are themselves part of the finite, created order. God is the creator of this order, and interacts dynamically with it but is clearly to be distinguished from it. Whether it is still possible to think the 'ancient' vision of God, time and history, or whether it may again become possible, is something I want to consider in the last part of this essay.

I. A Personal Tribute

I have read Kaufman with great interest for many years. He, like Paul Tillich, has the capacity to put old things in a new light. It is this creative imagination, which is unafraid to tackle the most difficult challenges of modern thought for Christianity, that has always inspired me. Tillich introduced me to the possibilities of mediation between the old and the new much earlier than did

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[1]See my "Towards a Theocentric Theology: Christ for the World," in Rodney J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland, eds., *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder* (Waterloo: Institute of Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies, Conrad Grebel College, 1993), 95-109. In this essay I discuss Burkholder's theology in relation to John H. Yoder, on the one side, and Gordon Kaufman, on the other.

[2]See Kaufman, "Preface," *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), xivff. Kaufman considers his *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975) to be the transition to a new understanding of theology as construction.

[3]Kaufman's rejection of the classical Platonic notion of an eternal, unchanging order within which time and history is to be understood is at the basis of his doctoral dissertation published as *Relativism, Knowledge and Faith* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

Kaufman, but the special significance of Kaufman for me was his Mennonite connection. He was the only Mennonite systematic theologian I knew who was seriously attempting to mediate between the tradition and contemporary experience and thought. For me, too, the Mennonite-Christian tradition as it had been passed on to me by home, church, and some other Mennonite thinkers, needed critical evaluation and reformulation in light of the modern world.

By the time I came to Kaufman, however, I had become somewhat disillusioned with the modern liberal project. I had accepted rather uncritically the deconstruction of the tradition in Western intellectual history from Kant onwards. My Master's research work was done on Ludwig Feuerbach, whom I criticized for not following through consistently enough his own theories in his life and practice. Even more important for me personally were the liberating insights of Freud and modern psychology.

In the mid-seventies, however, I came under the influence of the Canadian philosopher George Grant.[4] I experienced a kind of 'intellectual conversion.' Here was a thinker who opened my eyes to the assumptions lying behind the modern enterprise, particularly technology, from a Canadian perspective. For the first time I began seriously to question the direction in which the modern scientific and intellectual heritage has taken us.

The influence of Grant, combined with my studying at a Catholic university, which introduced me to the early Christian and medieval classics, moved me to a reconsideration of the classical imagination for the modern and postmodern period. It is during this period that I began studying Kaufman intensively. It seemed to me that Kaufman had bought into the modern liberal project too uncritically. He had gone beyond mediation to deconstruction and reconstruction. In this he was much more radical than Tillich ever was—Kaufman, in fact, criticizes Tillich for not being historicist enough, especially in his (Tillich's) later thinking. I began writing articles critical of Kaufman's theology.[5]

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[4]Some of George Grant's most important works are: *Philosophy in the Mass Age* (Toronto: The Copp Clark Publishing Co., 1959); *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1965); *Time as History* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1969); *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969); *English-Speaking Justice* (Sackville, New Brunswick: Mount Allison University Press, 1977).

[5]These include "Theological Method, Modernity and the Role of Tradition," in *Prophetic Vision Applied to One's Academic Discipline* (Elkhart: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1978), 109-121; an unpublished essay, "The Ethical Implications of Gordon Kaufman's Theology," written in the early 1980s, presented at a faculty

My basic disagreements with Kaufman were outlined in a 1978 essay, "Theological Method, Modernity and the Role of Tradition," in which I contrast Kaufman's and Grant's views. Although not rejecting everything Kaufman says, I take Grant's side and criticize Kaufman for writing off the classical tradition too easily, for not taking individual traditions (like the Mennonite) seriously enough in constructive work (traditions which he tends to write off as parochial), and for presuming that individual theologians can 'deliberately' construct more adequate concepts of God. I identify Kaufman's theology as a legitimation of the modern spirit (committed to "opening up the future into which humankind is moving"). Although arguing that Kaufman's theology is not adequate for our age, I acknowledge the many problems with traditional notions of God and end my essay with a *cul de sac*: "In short, we desperately need a more traditional concept of God, but we cannot believe in such a God. And to deliberately and self-consciously fashion such a concept for pragmatic and human reasons begs the question. This is the dilemma confronting the modern theologians." Ironically, it was a new appreciation for the doctrine of the Trinity, partly inspired by Kaufman's own interpretation of it, that later helped me to move beyond this dead end in my thinking.

This is the background to this essay. I come to it, however, with a new appreciation for Kaufman's theology. For one thing, I have lived intellectually with Grant for a while now, and my enthusiasm for his powerful critique of modern thought has been qualified on a number of accounts.[6] For another, through some recent, personal experiences with Kaufman as a conversation partner, as a gracious participant in my pastors' seminar

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colloquium at Conrad Grebel College; and "The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology," in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1 (Winter 1983): 33-55, in which I place Kaufman at the end of a Mennonite theological continuum beginning with Harold S. Bender, and continuing through Robert Friedman and John H. Yoder. I argue that Kaufman is the logical conclusion of a theological tradition in which ethics tends to takes precedence over everything else.

[6]Grant's critique of modern science and technology appear to me to be too strong. There is a 'mystical' dimension to much modern scientific work, which is not adequately accounted for by Grant's criticism of modern science as pure *techne*. Also, the Christian tradition calls us to look more hopefully at the world (even the modern world) as God's creation, and, therefore, open in every historical era to God's redemptive purposes, than is present in Grant's Christian philosophy.

(discussing his most recent book *In Face of Mystery*[7]), and as a public lecturer in our university, I have encountered the unexpected in Kaufman. First, his break with the tradition(s) can easily be over-emphasized. This holds for his method of doing theology, as well as his concept of God as "serendipitous creativity" and "mystery" of the world. It also holds for his Christology, in which the emphasis is not exclusively on the 'Jesus of Nazareth' (a liberal temptation) but on the whole Christ-event, finding its fullest expression in the "community of reconciliation" (traditionally defined as the 'body of Christ').

Second, Kaufman's self-perceived connection with the Mennonite tradition is much stronger than I had earlier realized. The late Hans Frei, a fellow student of Kaufman at Yale University, portrays Kaufman as someone engaged in pure academic theology abstracted from any commitment to a particular church context or religious tradition.[8] Kaufman tells me that this is a false appraisal of him and his theology. He grew up in a Mennonite home and community, is an ordained Mennonite minister and continues actively not only to participate but periodically to lead a Mennonite congregation in the Boston area. Furthermore, he explicitly identifies some of his central theological concerns as rooted in the Mennonite tradition—particularly the concern for the practical and ethical implications of his theology, rather than abstract dogmatic speculation. His view of the church as the "community of reconciliation," characterized by non-violent love, is the Mennonite in him. What struck me more forcefully than it had earlier was his nuanced understanding of freedom in *In Face of Mystery*. It is possible to read his 'constructive' theology as premised on the radical autonomy of the individual—his repeated critique of all forms of external authority (heteronomy) can easily be interpreted this way. This is to do an injustice, however, to his anthropology, which sees the individual not as isolated, but as historically shaped by the community of which s/he is a part. It is also to

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[7]*In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Hereafter, references to this work will be indicated in the body of the text as *Mystery*.

[8]See Hans Frei, *Five Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). There are times when Kaufman does idealize the academy in a way that might justify Frei's interpretation. For example, Kaufman says: "It may be that the only institutional context available in modern society for such open and unfettered theological conversation is to be found in our great liberal university" (*Mystery* 67).

ignore passages like the following where he explicitly rejects individualism:

> It is to the *community of selves in interaction* that we must look for the actual locus of the human, not the individual self, the ego. No individual selves could exist without a community which gave birth to them and continued to sustain them. . . . Human existence is fundamentally social in character, not individual, and the complexities to which 'we,' 'they,' and 'you' point cannot be understood as simply the consequence of putting a number of autonomous ego-selves together in various combinations (*Mystery*, 151).

What Kaufman objects to is this community exercising authoritarian power over its members, robbing individuals of personal responsibility to act morally in the world.

Third, what surprised me was Kaufman's pastoral concern and appeal. I had invited Kaufman to visit my Pastors' Theology Seminar, where we were reading his latest book, *In Face of Mystery*. It was interesting to hear pastors ask questions of the Harvard theologian, sometimes thought of as removed in his theology from the life of the believing, practicing, worshiping community. There was a remarkable openness on the part of many of the pastors to Kaufman's ideas. He was attempting to meet the challenges of modern life squarely, something the pastors in their own congregations are called upon to do, especially with young people. He drew our attention to his lengthy footnote directed especially to pastors. Their primary task, he says, is not to do the constructive and analytic work concerning God that he is doing in his book. Rather, it consists of dealing with the problems of people, taking care of administrative matters, leading in worship, and, most important, "*using* the language and symbolism of faith" in their liturgical and counseling activities. To take apart [deconstruct] the symbols of faith in the context of the congregation would be counter-productive. In educational settings, or in their own studies, however, it is appropriate for ministers to become theologians engaged in analytical, interpretive and reconstructive work (*Mystery*, 356).

Finally, it was his gracious, humanitarian spirit, and respect for religious experience and worship—also the recognition of the need for piety—that impressed me about Kaufman. He is profoundly aware that faith is not purely an intellectual exercise. It involves a reverent attitude to the mystery of life and a

commitment to a worldview which, if it is to orient our whole life, must evoke religious devotion. This is evident throughout *In Face of Mystery*, beginning with the Preface, which says: "In the theology set out in this book I attempt to express both my piety toward and my gratitude to the ultimate mystery which we daily confront" (*Mystery*, xii). He is aware, as well, of the difficulty of but need for deliberately constructing new theological concepts which will take on the symbolic power presupposed by religious devotion (*Mystery*, 232). He maintains that the metaphysical task with which he is occupied—namely, constructing a more adequate concept of God than the traditional one, a concept that is responsible ecologically and in every other way—points to "the real God who is in fact our creator, sustainer, and redeemer, and thus the God whom we today can and should worship and serve with unqualified devotion, respect, and love" (*Mystery*, 249). This is close to a traditional understanding of the God whom no one has seen and of whom no images can be made, the God behind all our own projections, the ineffable in the face of whom all our language is inadequate, the mystery which evokes astonishment and reverence.

In the light of this, what I have always found enigmatic in Kaufman is why he considers it necessary to dwell on the discontinuities between his work and the tradition. Why not work more imaginatively from within it, nurturing creatively the continuities in an age which is too prone as it is ahistorically to reject the past? I find his use of the metaphors of "deconstruction" and "construction" jarring. In his concept of "imaginative construction" he oddly juxtaposes what to me suggest quite different activities—imagination and construction. There is little doubt in my mind that imagination is central to theological thinking—it has been central to Christian theology and popular piety from the start. Good theologians have always recognized this. 'Imagination' suggests openness to influence and inspiration from the outside. The artist (musician, poet, painter) is moved to create ("grasped," to use Tillichian language). Mozart is, for me, an example of a composer whose creativity cannot be adequately accounted for purely in terms of his own learned skills. The term 'construction,' taken from the building trade, suggests the techniques of the craftsman, who uses materials at hand to build a product from bottom up. There is, to be sure, a craft-like activity to theological work, but by itself, the term 'construction' is too impoverished to do justice to the creative, inspirational dimension of theological work that Kaufman wants to emphasize.

II. A Constructive Theological Anthropology

There are two passions that drive Kaufman's theology. One is intellectual integrity. The modern Christian and theologian must, if s/he is to have integrity, come to terms with contemporary thought—philosophical, psychological and scientific. Insights from all the disciplines must be allowed to shape one's understanding of the Christian faith if it is to be adequate for our age. Another is his moral and ethical passion. This is a legacy of his Mennonite heritage. Kaufman is convinced that the traditional concept of God is 1) at least partially responsible for many of the inhumanities and evils of modern history, and 2) inadequate to meet the crises facing us. If we are to survive as a species we will need consciously and deliberately to construct a new concept of God for our age.

To construct a concept of God which has both intellectual integrity and can serve as a metaphysical grounding for a responsible ethic for today, Kaufman begins not with authoritative revelation but with cosmic and human origins and evolution, developing what he calls his "constructive theological anthropology" (*Mystery*, 141). Taking the natural and social sciences as his starting point, he traces the evolution of the human species in the context of cosmic evolution, and constructs a theology compatible with this. Here is the bare outline of his theological anthropology.

We are 'biohistorical' beings: 1) biological beings (animals) who along with everything else have evolved over millennia into our present form, and 2) historical beings in that at some point in the evolutionary process we have developed consciousness. He calls this the 'threshold' of consciousness (*Mystery*, 172). We are nature become conscious of itself, or spirit. Here Kaufman's thought has significant affinities with Hegel and other philosophers of consciousness (without Hegel's notion of spirit as Absolute). The 'bio' part connects us with nature; the 'historical' part distinguishes us from nature, reflecting our freedom over nature and our culture- and religion-creating capacity. Human life and consciousness is but one of the many evolutionary trajectiles that emerge serendipitously out of this process.

This biohistorical evolutionary process has given rise to diverse cultural and religious expressions in human history. Various religious worldviews have been created by human beings as ways of understanding the world in which they live, and to deal with the existential questions having to do with their own mortality,

as well as with the moral and ethical questions about how to exercise responsibly their freedom. Christianity is but one of these many religious worldviews. It has no intrinsic, self-evident or revealed superiority over other religions. Any preference given to Christian symbols (God, Christ, etc.) is purely functional—that is, they happen to be available to us and, what Kaufman tries to show in his book, they continue to be more adequate than others in focusing and orienting our lives, and providing a metaphysical grounding for our ethics.

The crucial factor for Kaufman is the recent (modern) realization that these religious beliefs are "worldviews," "interpretive schemes," "frames of orientation," that humans have created, and not revelations or descriptions of things as they really are. Kaufman calls this "imaginative construction." As a crafter of a material object builds his artifact, so the theologian carefully, step by step, constructs his/her theology. It has always been this way. Christians through the centuries have constructed their religious belief systems and doctrines this way. It is only in the modern period, however, that we acknowledge that our theological concepts are our own constructions. This makes all the difference.

To recognize that these are our own constructs 1) gives us the freedom to own this imaginative enterprise, makes us humble about our assertions, thus preventing idolatry; and 2) gives us the freedom more deliberately and consciously to set about to create new ones when necessary. The time has come, says Kaufman, to develop a more adequate Christian worldview as a way of dealing with the contemporary ecological, economic, political and social crises facing us. Our worldview remains Christian in the sense that 'God' and 'Christ' continue to be useful images for us but there is nothing of essential value in these particular symbols over others. If others can be found which are more adequate, we should abandon these.

Something which is frequently overlooked is that Kaufman is not denying the existence of a divine reality outside of our concepts. I found it surprising—something I had not noticed in earlier writings—how strongly Kaufman believes that we are not on our own (*Mystery*, 358) and that divine reality needs in some sense to be seen as outside ourselves and our own constructions: our symbol 'God' points beyond us, thus avoiding the "narcissism of individual egos" and the "curved-in character of human existence" (*Mystery*, 313). The divine reality behind or beyond our concept is "the ultimate mystery of things and the

serendipitous creativity at work in the world" (*Mystery*, 320). Here we run up against a difficulty.

To be consistent, Kaufman must recognize his own conceptualization, including his understanding of the biohistorical evolution of the human species and culture, to be a historical construct, and not a description of the way things really are. Despite his good intentions, one does get the impression that he does think his theological construct is more adequate than all others (particularly classical ones) because it is consistent with our understanding of the physical world and its historical evolution the way it really is (see, for instance, *Mystery*, 267). Consequently, he rules out more traditional, dogmatic interpretive schemes, despite his genuine desire to include all voices as conversation partners in the theological enterprise (*Mystery*, 305,455).

III. Two Views of Time

Kaufman's key for understanding reality is historical time—that is, the movement from past to present to future—a sequential, linear, forward directionality. It is true that cosmic evolution and the development of different forms of life within the cosmos is, according to Kaufman, no simple straight line. There are whirls and eddies, the emergence of life forms and their demise, the possibility of human self-destruction. He calls these emergences of life forms "trajectiles," "time's arrows," the very language Cambridge physicist Stephen Hawking uses to talk about cosmic processes.[9]

Kaufman consciously rejects the concept of a simple, straight-line evolutionary development, and distinguishes his concept of historical time from 19th century views of progress and historical relativism. And yet, he finds a "forward directionality" in the universe, and even talks about the "inexorable conveyor belt" (*Mystery*, 167) and the "great evolutionary march upward" that we are on (*Mystery*, 280). Human beings have transcended blind evolutionary movement (*Mystery*, 106); nevertheless, even human beings with their freedom from necessity are caught in the forward flow of history from which they cannot escape—they are condemned to be free and historical beings (*Mystery*, 131-133). The cosmos is a unified whole which is evolving, and the fact

[9]Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (London: Bantam Books, 1988, 1990), 143-153.

that biohistorical beings, who have purposes, have emerged within this cosmic evolution justifies us talking about cosmic teleology, a kind of "proto-teleology" leading up to human life. It is a teleology and purposefulness that is evident only retrospectively.

Kaufman is quick, however, to distance himself from traditional notions of teleology and time. We cannot turn the clock back to a previous unhistorical way of existing (*Mystery*, 131). We have passed the point of no return. Early (parochial) conceptualizations of the world, which assumed the existence of "unchanging truths," "eternal values," "natural rights," and "universal human essences" are outmoded (*Mystery*, 136). While Kaufman sees the need for a universal, global ethic—one which calls on people to take full responsibility for their historical freedom—he does not by this mean to turn to some traditional notion of universal, self-evident or rational principles of what is right, good, just, beautiful (*Mystery*, 198-199). To act morally is to act in such a way as to further the cause of human historicity and freedom. Earlier trans-historical pictures of existence contain absurdities and incoherences which make them incredible for today (*Mystery*, 222).

The choice, for Kaufman, is between two ways of viewing time:

> Should we conceive the evolutionary-historical development here on earth (which has given rise to human existence) (a) as transpiring within *an eternal structure* of things which follows essentially the same patterns forever, that is, as set within parameters or limits determined by some eternal, unchanging order? or (b) as a part, and expression of, *a cosmic evolutionary-historical process* that characterizes or pervades all reality? (*Mystery*, 251)

According to Kaufman, there is a great division between civilizations, between those who have emphasized the primacy of structure, order and being (Greeks and oriental worldviews), and those which have taken history, change, process, and development to be primary (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Marxism). Ancient Israel already moved toward a more historical-evolutionary understanding in which "the structures and cycles of the cosmos are not permanent or eternal; they come into being through God's creative activity in time" (*Mystery*, 252). In my own thinking, this sharp division between the Greek (ontological) and the Judeo-Christian (historical) that is implicit in Kaufman's portrayal of the classical tradition needs to be seriously

questioned. I continue to believe that 'Athens' and 'Jerusalem' have more in common with each other than either one has with our modern and postmodern historicism. Both presuppose a reality (an eternal order or a transcendent God) which is to be differentiated from linear time and history.

Having introduced us to this great division, Kaufman says we are unable to choose between these two worldviews on the basis of empirical evidence because we are never in a position to see the universe as a whole (*Mystery*, 254). These are two imaginative constructs, and there continue to be those who hold on to the earlier understanding of time. So we choose between them on the basis of other than objective or empirical grounds—namely, on the basis of which one most adequately "facilitate[s] and promote[s] human existence within the actual ecosystem within which we live" (*Mystery*, 257) and "most adequately interprets all the wideness and richness of human life in our ecologically ordered world" (*Mystery*, 258). In the end, therefore, Kaufman unequivocally opts for the evolutionary-historical model. He remains convinced that people who continue to think of reality in terms of more classical understandings of time are out of touch with modern scientific and philosophical insights. No longer can we legitimately postulate a reality "outside of" the one interconnected world ("this world") of which we all are a part (*Mystery*, 325-326).

IV. Questions of Kaufman

In the final part of this essay I would like to challenge Kaufman in three areas: 1) Adequacy: Is the evolutionary-historical model alone truly adequate to account for the full spectrum of human experience? 2) Credibility: Is it necessary to choose between the two views of time, the way Kaufman does, in order to offer a credible imagination for today? 3) Fidelity: Are there not resources in the classical tradition which might inspire the theological imagination for today and tomorrow?

1) Adequacy. One of Kaufman's criteria for determining the acceptability of a theological model is its adequacy for grounding ethics and accounting for the full range of human experience. He defends "moral and personal values such as loyalty, honesty, integrity, freedom, self-sacrifice, love, responsible action" (*Mystery*, 347), and the treating of human beings as ends in themselves and not as means to an end (*Mystery*, 198-199). Is this not a deontological ethic; and if so, does this not contradict an evolutionary-historical ethic, in which the survival of the human

species, the balance of the ecosystem, and the prolongation of the historical future as goals are the primary determinants of right or wrong? Must one not finally hold to the rightness of promoting freedom, justice, equality, human dignity, nonviolent love, loyalty and regard for all of God's creation on other than pragmatic-historical grounds (the continuation of history)? And are these other grounds not something akin to what the tradition has called, for lack of a better term, 'revealed truths?' And, when one once talks about ethics this way, is one not saying that not everything in human life can be explained or talked about in terms of the historical-evolutionary model?

The most dramatic illustration for me of the inadequacy of viewing both the basis and the goal of ethics solely as the prolongation of life and history was the television show some years ago (during the cold war era) that depicted the morning after a hypothetical nuclear holocaust. There were some survivors but they were all dying, and it was a matter of hours before the entire human race would be wiped out. A doctor was still going about trying to save lives and applying healing medicines. Why was he doing this? Because there was a commitment to the intrinsic duty of mitigating suffering and caring for people, independent of historical time. He was treating human beings as ends in themselves. Each moment and life had an 'absolute' quality to it. Kaufman could say this illustration supports his point: namely, the intrinsic value of prolonging lives. But does this argument not leave us with the absurd situation in which one's reason for ethical action is grounded in nothing else but the history that is about to come to an end? In other words, the basis for the action is gone. It strikes me that both Kaufman and the doctor in their commitment to the prolongation of life are drawing on an older tradition than the evolutionary-historical one. Luther's famous dictum that "should the world end tomorrow I would still plant an apple tree today," is similarly premised on a view of time different than the historical one.

Especially in the birth of my children I experience that their lives appear *from some realm beyond historical time or the evolutionary process.* There appears an individual personality not fully explainable with reference to parental genes and sexual intercourse. Here, in some metaphorical sense, is an 'absolutely' new beginning (the entry of the eternal into the temporal). Similarly, in the face of death, one senses the end of history for a particular life. Kierkegaard and the existentialists understood this finality of the moment before God in a way that is missing in Kaufman's evolutionary-historical model. The possibility of

freedom and novelty, so highly regarded by Kaufman, is more adequately preserved in a non-evolutionary picture of reality.

2) *Credibility.* But is such a non-evolutionary model of time credible today? I find myself restless with the criterion of credibility. Credible to whom? To the academic elite (scientists, philosophers, theologians), or to artists, the general populace? There seems to be little consensus within any of these groups as to what is credible and what isn't. I will propose below that we need not choose between the two views of time described by Kaufman, but can combine them in a creative and imaginative way that is both credible today and faithful to the tradition.

There are those (e.g. George Grant and Hans Jonas) who have thought deeply about these matters and given a penetrating analysis of modern technology and the liberal assumptions behind it, who struggle with the same issues that Kaufman does, and offer viable alternatives. They do not deny that we are historical beings, that we cannot escape our historicity, that we cannot turn the clock back, that we have historical responsibility to overcome evil and injustice. What they do say is 1) that historicism (interpreting all of reality in terms of historical willing and dynamics—the evolutionary movement from past to present to future, or forward directionality) does not adequately account for everything; 2) that, in fact, the modern crisis in the ecosystem, among other things, is not to be solved by, but is largely the consequence of, the human-history-making obsession in the modern period; and 3) that some imagination beyond the purely historical will need to be found not only for the sake of our survival but for its intrinsic truthfulness.

Hans Jonas, a Jewish philosopher concerned with ethical responsibility in a technological age, deals with the same issues Kaufman does, but rejects the evolutionary, forward directional model. Like Kaufman, he is convinced that we cannot go back to the ancients. They thought "vertically (in terms of the eternal)" not "horizontally (the prolongation of the temporal)."[10] In classical ethics "the drive is upward, not forward, toward being, not into becoming" (Jonas, 125). This has changed in the modern period. What dominates modern existence is dynamism, that is, historical change. Our ontology is not one of eternity but of time. At the basis of this change is a new view of nature and human action.

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[10]Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 125. Hereafter, references to this work will be given in the body of the text as (Jonas).

Nature can no longer take care of itself; it has become vulnerable to intervention by human science and technology, and needs rather to be taken care of. It can no longer carry the freight of post-Enlightenment human exploitation and thus has acquired a "moral claim on us." The irony is that "the very same movement which puts us in possession of the powers that have now to be regulated by norms—the movement of modern knowledge called science—has by a necessary complementarity eroded the foundations from which norms could be derived, it has destroyed the very idea of norm as such" (Jonas, 22).

Jonas seeks to establish a contemporary ethic which is grounded in norms outside of human willing; that is, outside the historical dynamic which has created the technological threat in the first place. His conclusions bear some similarity to Kaufman's. He develops a view of nature which is neither supernaturalistic (what he considers to be traditional religious dualism) or naturalistic (modern evolutionary and deterministic materialism). His basic moral axiom is: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life" (Jonas, 11), or "Never must the existence or the essence of . . . [humanity] as a whole be made a stake in the hazards of action" (Jonas, 37). So far he is in agreement with Kaufman. But then he makes a crucial move which distinguishes him from Kaufman.

He rejects evolutionary, "becoming" worldviews, which consider "everything past as a stepping-stone to the future" (Jonas, 16). Instead, he develops an ontological ethic—a metaphysics of being rather than becoming. The source of human obligation is the goodness of Being itself (of which human and non-human natures are a part). Although, like Kaufman, Jonas does not think we can go back to the "Eternal truths" of a bygone age, he is more pensive and tentative about it. He even appears to lament the loss of the Eternal found in traditional religions and in Platonic thought. It may be, he reflects, that sometime in the future "Plato's way" will once again become "eligible." In fact, "we must leave it open whether it may not be more adequate to the truth than ours." He even ponders whether "the abolition of transcendence may [not] have been the most colossal mistake in history." Nevertheless, for the moment, we cannot extricate ourselves from our situation; "responsibility for what has been set aside and is kept moving by ourselves, takes precedence before everything else" (Jonas, 129).

The novel view of nature and human action required in the modern era makes imperative a moral ethic of responsibility,

premised on the intrinsic goodness of Being itself. This new ethic of responsibility must be radically different than modern eschatological-utopian thinking. Our hope lies in recovery of "absolute *presence* in itself—no past, no future, no promise, no succession, whether better or worse, not a prefiguration of anything, but rather timeless shining itself. *That* is the 'utopia' beyond every 'not yet,' scattered moments of eternity in the flux of time" (Jonas, 200). What is required for our world to survive, to be able to bear the burden of human activity, is "to *unhook the demands of justice, charity and reason from the bait of utopia*" (Jonas, 201). Kaufman's theology cannot be said to be utopian, but he does, it would appear, hook justice, charity and reason to forward directionality.

There is no question that when one talks about the cosmos, the world as a whole, that which transcends the biological and material, one is no longer describing literally the ways things are but using metaphorical and analogical language. Early Christian theologians knew this. So the issue is not whether one chooses a literal approach over a metaphorical one, but which picture one thinks more adequate, credible and faithful. It seems to me just as credible to interpret the modern, post-Enlightenment approach to history and history-making as largely responsible for the crises of the modern period as to view this same commitment as a solution to our problems. Further, if this is the case, then it would appear credible to search for an imagination which grounds a responsible ethic more adequately, and more fully accounts for the full range of human experience.

3) Fidelity. There is something to be said for maintaining a fidelity to the tradition, particularly if one appropriates for oneself the name and central symbols of that tradition. To call oneself a Christian theologian, rather than something else, is to make a decision to interpret the world within certain parameters given by the sacred texts and historical confessions of Christianity. At what point one's reinterpretation and reimagining of that tradition in new situations becomes a transition to a new religious worldview is not self-evident to me. That there is such a point I do not doubt. How far can one 'deconstruct' and 'reconstruct' the symbols of the Judeo-Christian tradition and still remain a *Christian* theologian? The answer to this question may have to be left to the individual theologian and the Christian community of which s/he is a part, but it is worth asking. Fidelity to the tradition(s) has to do with intellectual, personal and moral integrity just as much as do the criteria of adequacy and credibility.

I would say that the central affirmations of faith, as expressed in the historical confessions and creeds of the Christian church (eschatological), are relevant to the question of fidelity. Of these the Christian doctrine of God, in which 1) the Jewish-Christian notion of the one transcendent God, of whom no images can be made; 2) the Christ in whom this God is believed to be revealed historically; and 3) the Holy Spirit through whom this God is experienced as dynamically present in the world, generally, and in the church as the community of reconciliation particularly, are indispensable. This is the language of faith and experience, not of abstract philosophical speculation, a language passed on from generation to generation. These central Christian affirmations together with the other historical doctrines related to them are not literal descriptions of reality but are truly 'symbols' of the faith by which we orient our lives.

I do not believe, as Kaufman apparently does, that one needs to choose between the two views of time he identifies—the 'ontological-eternal' and the 'evolutionary-historical.' It is precisely the trinitarian doctrine of God that allows us to hold these together: the eternal dimension, the historical dimension, and the dynamic-evolutionary interaction of the two. Kaufman's own interpretation of the Trinity can help us to combine the two, thereby avoiding a 'Deism' on the one side and a 'Pantheism' on the other (*Mystery*, 412-425, 492-494).

Kaufman uses the provocative model of conversation to illustrate serendipitous creativity (God) at work, combining both determinacy and indeterminacy: "Often the interchange comes to have 'a life of its own' (as we say), and it may well go in directions no one had anticipated and lead to new insights and ideas which none of the participants had thought of before" (*Mystery*, 275). Although I find this model attractive, it does not adequately capture the 'structure,' 'durability,' and 'givenness' that I believe the Christian confesses as present in human experience and reality as a whole.

After all, even Einstein's theory of relativity is premised on the fixed speed of light, and physicist Stephen Hawking talks about boundary conditions and "underlying order" when referring to the cosmos: "The whole history of science has been the gradual realization that events do not happen in an arbitrary manner, but that they reflect a certain underlying order, which may or may not be divinely inspired. It would be only natural to suppose that this order should apply not only to the laws, but also to the

conditions at the boundary of space-time that specify the initial state of the universe."[11]

An analogy that I have used is that of the scrabble game in contrast to a jigsaw puzzle. In a jigsaw puzzle the outcome (final design) is predetermined. There is virtually no freedom involved. People 'play the game' only to find the right piece for the right spot in order to complete the picture. It is true that some traditional theologians have seen God's activity in this way, but it does not adequately represent the classical Christian tradition. The scrabble game is a more appropriate metaphor. With the scrabble game there are a number of invariables: the limits of the board, the alphabet, the values of the letters, the rules by which the game is played. These represent the structure and givenness of the game. The variables include the luck (chance) involved in picking the letters, the intelligence (rationality) of the player's knowledge of vocabulary, the skill of the playing itself. The game also depends on the interaction and interdependence of the various players without which it could not be played. The most interesting factor is the extent of the individual player's freedom in relation to the fixed limits of the game. There is no predetermined design; the design emerges gradually with the playing, and is fully evident only at the end—no two games are identical in their design. Can it be said that the players construct the outcome? In some sense this is true; but there are too many variables (including chance, intelligence, creativity, the moves of other players) to say that what is happening is pure construction. A mysterious quality behind the playing of the game moves it towards its final, unique end, weaving together all the factors mentioned. Theologically speaking, this metaphor is not perfect. It does, however, suggest what I mean when I think of divine presence unifying the various diverse factors in the movement toward an emerging pattern. This pattern emerges within the framework of cosmic structure, boundaries and laws. Human construction is only one of the variables involved.

[11]Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 122-123.

Chapter 13

Einbildungskraft: 1. Imagination 2. The Power to Form into One

Scott Holland

When one thinks about the method of "doing theology" or the sources of theological authorship or "voice" in the modern Mennonite-Anabaptist tradition, a small cluster of signifiers quickly comes to mind: *Gelassenheit*, *Gemeinde*, community and the hermeneutics of peoplehood. The vocation of the theologian in our tradition is largely scribal, as he or she functions as an agent of the collective memory and consciousness.[1] Most contemporary

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[1]Since it is recognized that theology is a kind of writing, the issue of theological authorship—with attention to the inherent tensions between community and creativity—is currently under theoretical investigation in the theological and religious studies academy. See John E. Thiel, *Imagination and Authority: Theological Authorship in the Modern Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). A parallel conversation concerning the tensions between community and creativity is going on in Mennonite literary circles. Al Reimer, in *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past and Present* (Newton: Bethel College, 1993), explores the difference between community-minded, inward looking American-Swiss-Mennonite writers and their more individualistic Dutch-Russian-Canadian cousins. He suggests that John Ruth and to some extent Jeff Gundy (and others) are most interested in the writer's connection to the collective experience and wisdom sanctioned by the community. The Mennonite writer or artist thus has a rather domestic or scribal calling and vocation. See Ruth's *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1978) and Gundy's "Humility in Mennonite Literature," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63 (January 1989): 5-21. In contrast, poets and writers like Patrick Friesen, Rudy Wiebe and Di Brandt are stronger advocates of artistic freedom and autonomy. Brandt is blunt and unapologetic: "I think that literature is one of the ways of killing off Mennonite separateness . . . I'm helping to kill it off." See Maurice Mierau, "Rebel Mennos Move into the Arts," *Midcontinental* (Midwinter 1987-1988), 19. Friesen argues for the radical autonomy of the artist: "There is no authority over art. Not religious, not social nor political, not academic, not theoretical." See Friesen, *Prairie Fire* 11 (Summer 1990), 164. Consider Kaufman's advocacy of the intellectual freedom of the theologian: "It is theology which explains and interprets the church through developing an ecclesiology; it is not the church which explains and interprets theology." Kaufman, "Theology as a Public Vocation," in T. W. Jennings, ed., *The Vocation of the Theologian* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). My own thought concerning this interesting tension between creativity and community in the production of meaning has been stimulated and informed by conversations with poet Julia Kasdorf. Her evolving work situates the writer in a creative space somewhere between the mimetic memory of the scribe and the myth of an autonomous artistic genius. Francoise Meltzer has recently challenged the notion of "originality" through her

Mennonite theologians now concede that the Word of God never falls onto the theologian's desk or into the preacher's pulpit like a stone from heaven; instead, it is heard, interpreted, and applied in and through a faithful and disciplined community of believers.[2] The theologian as scribe writes as a servant of the community and communal memory, which seeks to recover, restore and mimic its true origins in the subversive memory of Jesus as it is recorded in the church's book, the Bible.

However, when one considers theological method and authorship in the work of Gordon Kaufman, a very different central signifier emerges: *Einbildungskraft* or imagination. For Kaufman, theology is not a narrowly hermeneutical or descriptive task; it is imaginative construction. Thus, I would suggest, in Kaufman's understanding of the theological vocation, the Christian theologian is not a scribe for the collective but rather a creative composer on behalf of a larger vision of shalom or human wholeness through the analysis, criticism and revision of an ultimate symbol that relativizes all communal construals of knowledge and all tribal idols and deities: namely, the symbol God; and through the strategic use of a symbol that seeks to humanize all social practices: namely, Christ.

In this theological essay, drawing from my experience of fifteen years of ordained ministry in the Mennonite Church and the

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provocative challenge of modern authorship and its reliance on the masculine and bourgeois values of originality, work and property. See her *Hot Property: The Stakes and Claims of Literary Originality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). In this paper I am not suggesting that Gordon Kaufman's theological voice is grounded in a Romantic language and experience of the imagination free of mimesis. I am instead interested in the *variety* of mimetic memories, thoughts, experiences, practices and dreams that carry his work far beyond the totalizing narrative and practices of his insular community of origin. Both Kaufman and Duane Friesen have recently suggested, much like Al Reimer, that the quarrel between the sociologically separate, rule of the community and the culturally engaged freedom of the individual may in many ways be a Mennonite Church-General Conference Mennonite Church distinction. See Kaufman's "Jesus as Absolute Norm? Some Questions," in R. Sawatsky and S. Holland, eds., *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder* (Waterloo: Institute of Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies at Conrad Grebel College, 1993), and Friesen's "Duane E. Friesen Responds to Gerald W. Schlabach," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 12 (Winter 1994): 87-89.

[2]No one in Anabaptist circles has done more than John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas to demonstrate the community-dependent nature of theological and moral language. See Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) and Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scriptures: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

Church the Brethren, I would like to reflect on several ways in which Kaufman's project of public, imaginative theological composition can serve our tradition well as we prepare to enter the 21st century as members of a church attentive to God's agenda for peace and justice in a religiously and culturally plural world.[3] I will organize my reflections around five themes: 1) Imagination Beyond Mimetic Memory, 2) Translucent World-Pictures Over Narrative Closures, 3) A Dis-Embodied Church or an Embodied Theology and Ethics? 4) From Christocentrism to Christomorphism, 5) From a Metaphysics of Morals to a Poetics of Obligation.

Imagination Beyond Mimetic Memory

There is something both premodern and postmodern in our community-minded tradition's rejection of the Enlightenment and Romantic celebrations of the modern, autonomous, sovereign self. Our trained preachers and theologians blend their voices with radical poststructuralists in insisting that our consciousness of God, self, others and world is socially or communally constituted and mediated. We come to consciousness only in the company of others. It is recognized that even our revealed knowledge of God has an inescapable cultural-linguistic grounding.

Yet too many of these theologians and ministers do something quite disappointing with this liberating, postmodern awareness of the relativity of knowledge and the myth of the sovereign self. They display a terrible failure of nerve when they retreat from the public square into their sacred reservations and replace the dubious, modern, sovereign self with the premodern sovereignty of the community. This hermeneutical move represses creativity as the community must jealously guard the copyrighted original meaning and memory of the Jesus story and its best restoration in the Anabaptist Vision. While this move delights scribes, it distresses those who are interested in composing well-integrated, credible models of God and the world in light of the evolving pleasures and problems of multiculturalism and religious pluralism.

Every year scores of bright and imaginative Mennonite and Brethren students and young adults leave the church. I speak to many of them on their way out. While some are simply eager to

[3]This short essay is responding to Kaufman's thought in light of the entire corpus of his theological project, especially his *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

lose themselves in the strange pleasures of modernity, many confess that our tradition does not have a theology or a worldview that can hold their emerging thought and experience. They have grown weary of uncompromising ideological readings of the Jesus story in an age of increasing tribalism and sectarian violence. These exclusive readings, they suggest, actually contribute to intolerance and violence in the world.[4] The harsh dualisms between Christ and culture or the redeemed church and the fallen world can no longer accommodate their mode of being in the world. As citizens of modern pluralistic democracies, they gladly live in several communities simultaneously and thus have diverse and sometimes competing and conflicting passions and responsibilities. Their consciousness has been shaped by overlapping communities of discourse. The community-minded theology that served the peasant culture of their grandparents well cannot address their complex, contemporary realities. They need more than a theology of the church; they desire a theology of the world. They need much more than mimetic memory to compose a life for themselves; they need imagination.

The German word for imagination, *Einbildungskraft*, begins to provide an image of the productive imagination.[5] Literally, it

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[4]We modern Anabaptists are quick to denounce the sins of militarism, racism and sexism, but we are strangely silent about the sin of *religionism*. My old teacher Hans Küng addresses this problem of religionism when he argues: "There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There can be no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions." Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a World Ethic* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

[5]I must stress here that I am not trying to set up a dualism between mimesis and imagination. My concern is to contrast the productive imagination with a narrow mimetic memory (imitation or copy). In this context I am suggesting a tension between *poiesis* and *mimesis* (invention and copying) in the task of composing a life and holistic models of God and world. The question becomes whether the theologian is an auditor or author, a scribe or a creative writer. Imaginative theological composition of course does not imply the creation of models of God and world-pictures *ex nihilo*. The issue is what *kind* of mimesis feeds the imagination: the following after (*Nachfolge*, discipleship) the master story of one cultural-linguistic community of memory or the more dangerous but exciting journey through loose and even forbidden canons. There are of course many theories of the imagination and many theories of mimesis. The most helpful book I know on the varieties of "imagination" is Richard Kearney's *The Wake of Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). My own developing thought on imagination and mimesis has been informed by the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur suggest that not only do we not have access to a "mirror relation to reality," but that even our most cherished mimetic memories are filtered through a "glass darkly." Even memory is an act of imaginative composition and creation. See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago

means, "the power to form into one." It is not surprising that Gordon Kaufman was invited to the Arts, Religion and Literature section of the American Academy of Religion to talk about his creative and integrative work on the imagination and God.[6] It was recognized that few other academic theologies could accommodate creative expression as well as Kaufman's work. I am pleased that Gordon's multi-dimensional theological imagination is finally being recognized as a valuable gift to the Mennonite church.[7] It may not be a satisfying theology for scribes, but it does provide hospitable space for artists, scientists, writers, poets and political activists. Unlike much theology done by Mennonites, his project is not grounded in the story of our people and our church, but in the larger images of the mysteries of God, humanity and the world.

Translucent World-Pictures Over Narrative Closures

The recent narrative turn in theology, hermeneutics and critical theory has been welcomed into the Mennonite church and academy. However, as the Spring 1994 issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* on "Narrative and Theology" reminds us, some expressions of narrative theology can be quite conservative, colonizing, and chauvinistic.[8] The variety of narrative theology practiced by Karl Barth, Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas, John Yoder and some enthusiastic Mennonite disciples unapologetically asserts that the church's story must swallow up the world's story and that the disciple's narrative must eclipse the human narrative. The true believer must practice *Gelassenheit* and

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Press, 1984, 1985, 1988). Kaufman's method reflects this inescapable union of imagination and mimesis when he demonstrates that even the chain of signifiers so central to the Christian faith—God, sin, love, salvation—are not mere Christian inventions or property but that they have their origins in the broader cultural language and experience. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1979).

[6]Gordon Kaufman, "Theology as Imaginative Construction," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 (March 1982).

[7]Many "Mennos on the margins" are discovering Kaufman's work. See Sheri Hostetler's fine interview with Kaufman in *Mennonot* No. 2, (Spring 1994).

[8]For a discussion of *open* in contrast to *closed* narratives in the challenge of doing theology see my "How Do Stories Save Us? Two Theological Responses," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 12, (Spring 1994): 131-154. I propose a model of narrative reflection committed to "loose canons," in which one can be transformed by the stories of Others. This theme of openness to the stories of others/strangers is eloquently developed in an essay by Julia Kasdorf in the same issue of *CGR*, "When the Stranger is an Angel," pp. 197-201.

submissively find her place in the plot of the faithful community's narrative. This story tends to be conservative; it has a clear and determinate beginning, middle and ending that closes neatly around a community of epistemological and axiological privilege with the words, "The End."

In light of this problem of narrative closure, I find Kaufman's focus in his work on the imaginative construction of "*pictures*" of God and the world inviting for at least three reasons:

First, it is more holistic in its emphasis than narrative. It can carry us beyond our very Protestant temptation to idolize the Word-Event or the Bible by helping us overcome the word-image dualism of our iconoclastic ancestors.[9] It can move us beyond our sober scribal texts to laughing, singing, dancing texts. This picture theory can remind us to read our world and our bodies as carefully as we read our Bibles. It can show us not only how the word becomes flesh, but how the flesh can also become word. It can help us unite vision and voice and icon and logos. It can teach us to read Rembrandt, paint rhetoric and see stories.

Second, Kaufman's attention to the imaginative composition of world-pictures over the retelling of traditional stories reminds us that theology or religion is a creative art, not an exact science. It is really more of a poetics than a metaphysics. Like all involved in creative expression and meaning making, Baptists and Buddhists, Mennonites and Muslims, are engaged in the very human task of trying to orient themselves to the mysteries of the cosmos by producing interesting and meaningful models and metaphors of God, humanity and the world. We are all in this mystery together and can thus promote the shalom of the planet

[9]The problem of the word-image dualism in our tradition is being identified by many working in the arts. It is also a concern for those interested in the formative power of ritual in worship. Although I have a deep appreciation for narrative texts and traditions, I suspect our tradition is impoverished by its lack of appreciation for visual and performative texts. Until recently, my own narrative theology has neglected image and ritual. For a discussion of this see my "Signifying Presence," *Louvain Studies* 18 (1993): 131-154. My thought concerning the word-image opposition has been informed by two important works: Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). When Vincent Van Gogh was disciplined by his church's hierarchy, he traded his pulpit for a paint brush. An engaging study of word, image and God through an examination of Van Gogh's biography and art is found in Cliff Edward's *Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989).

by listening to one another and learning from the religious and cultural expressions of others.

Third, while narratives can tend to close with the words "the end," Kaufman's "world-pictures" carry a surplus of meaning, always inviting further interpretation and revision concerning their sense and reference, and always resisting final and absolute statements about their "true" and "real" meaning. There is a great religious temptation to privilege history and tradition as singularly normative and to elevate the experiences and stories of one's cultural-linguistic community as God's grand meta-narrative. There is a troubling human temptation to seek an easy totality on a narrow ridge of history and flee the difficult plurality and ambiguity of God's infinity. The excess of meaning in Kaufman's pictures of God and the world disrupts any totalitarianism of community, text, tradition or privileged experience.

A Dis-Embodied Church or an Embodied Theology and Ethics?

The unfortunate influence of Karl Barth's infamous "Nein!" to any possibility of a natural theology has been felt in our tradition.[10] Our farmers learn that the strange and satisfying sensations of the barn and field cannot be carried into the meetinghouse where God speaks through the revealed, inscripted Word, not through the sounds, sights and smells of ordinary, phenomenological slices of life. One of Barth's favorite students, John Howard Yoder, moved beyond his mentor's theology of the Word-Event to an even more world-denying, body-denying, sectarian theology and hermeneutics. His work suggests that spiritual truth and meaning are discerned not through mere revelation, reason, experience or nature, but through the "hermeneutics of peoplehood." He moves beyond Barth's positivism of revelation only to replace it with a communal positivism. His theology has in fact shaped the Anabaptist ministers and theologians of my generation.

The true peoplehood in Yoder's program is not humanity in all its diversity and mystery, but it is the church in its radical particularity and certitude. This peoplehood, according to Yoder,

[10]The theological mood of our seminaries and college Bible or religion departments remains "Barthian" in worldview. In Barth's program spirit swallows up nature/creation. See H. Paul Santmire, "Healing the Protestant Mind," in Dieter T. Hessel, ed., *After Nature's Revolt* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

precedes humanity; indeed, this church precedes the world.[11] In this model the individual, historical, carnal body is slain and its corpse is baptized into a communal, transhistorical body politics: the Body of Christ. Human desire is eclipsed by discipleship and eros is tamed and swallowed up by a famished, churchly body.[12]

Gordon Kaufman's biohistorical understanding of theological anthropology provides us with exciting possibilities for the development of a truly embodied theology and ethics: A theology that takes the human body and the world as God's body as seriously as it takes the ecclesiastical body. While the imagination may necessarily lead us through utopian texts and longings for heavenly kingdoms on earth to overthrow a K-Mart historical realism with more creative historical constructions of "the real," it nevertheless must return to the body; we live, laugh, cry, make love, fall ill and die in shelters of flesh and stone. Kaufman's contention that a biohistorical conception of the human can offer some normative ethical insights and claims is a welcome idea to those of us who are trying to find our way out of disembodied theologies and mythological kingdoms to remember that we too are indeed part of nature. An ecological understanding of our human and historical contingency and of our continuing interdependence with the whole web of life, can, I think, only lead us to a more honest and emancipatory theology of peace and justice.

With few exceptions, contemporary Anabaptist theologians give us an anthropology of the disciple, not the human. They provide us with a cosmology of the kingdom, not creation. They fail to help us appreciate how theological reality is always grounded in historical, human reality. This approach to theology only continues and extends the Western patriarchal tradition's harsh divisions between freedom and nature, reason and feeling, desire and duty, church and world, body and the sacred. It provides little cause for the celebration of embodied existence. Gordon Kaufman's incomparable theological imagination invites us beyond the idols of perfect Words, heavenly kingdoms, messianic communities and holy disciples to the possibility of seeing carnal bodies, the evolving cosmos and serendipitous creativity as icons, not idols, of the divine.

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[11]Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 11.

[12]I develop this criticism in a paper presented at the Anabaptist Vision(s) Conference in October, 1994 at Goshen College. "Communal Hermeneutics as Body Politics or Dis-Embodied Theology? The Erotic and Ecological Failures and Possibilities of the Anabaptist Vision." Forthcoming.

From Christocentrism to Christomorphism

Gordon Kaufman proposes a "wider Christology." In his model the symbol or name "Christ" is not exhausted by an exclusive reference to the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Instead, it refers to a range of liberating events surrounding and including Jesus; it signifies "the whole new order of relationships of humans to God and to one another within which the early Christian community understood itself to be living."[13] This wider Christology thus leads one to a wider understanding of the beloved community. Gordon asserts that the Christ-symbol extends beyond the solitary figure of Jesus to include the community of reconciliation that grew up in response to his work—"and in principle, thus, it can be extended to all communities of genuine healing, love, and justice."[14]

I find this move from Christocentrism to Christomorphism quite attractive.[15] I grew up down wind from the Kent State anti-war uprisings. In high school I protested against the war in Vietnam along side Jews, agnostics and atheists. We were all beaten up together for being "unpatriotic pacifist pussies" by the football team with the blessing of its redneck coaches. At one demonstration I was thrown to the ground by a fundamentalist Baptist minister who delivered a violent kick along with an earnest confession: "Jesus is Lord!" Narrow Christocentric peace theologies did not address my historical realities. I was more interested in a Christomorphic faith that would enable me to form coalitions and even "community" with other nonconformists, cognitive minorities, communities of resistance and reconciliation, and dissenters in a great society. Kaufman's Christology addresses my world-picture and spirituality well.

From a Metaphysics of Morals to a Poetics of Obligation

I think Gordon is quite accurate in his observation that we Mennonites have understood the Christian faith be most

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[13]Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 385.

[14]Kaufman, "Mennonite Peace Theology in a Religiously Plural World," forthcoming in *The Conrad Grebel Review*, and *In Face of Mystery*, 397.

[15]Kaufman does not use the term "Christomorphism" to describe his understanding of "a wider Christology," however, I think it is a useful signifier when thinking about Kaufman's program. David Tracy uses the term to illustrate the problems of a narrow "Christocentric" theology. Tracy, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity," *Theology Today* 51 (April 1994): 104-114.

fundamentally about *how life is to be lived.*[16] A strength of our tradition is its emphasis on practical morality and relational integrity over mere assent to creedal confessions and doctrinal formulas. Most are familiar with the classic Mennonite folk tale that illustrates this point. I first heard it from J. C. Wenger who insisted that for him it captured the essence of Mennonite moral identity.[17] You know the story. An elderly Mennonite gentleman was approached by a zealous, young evangelist. "Are you saved?" the young man asked. The old man smiled silently. The earnest evangelical persisted, "Do you know the Lord?" The old man reached into his pocket, took out a piece of paper and a pen, and began to write. He wrote the name of his wife, the names of his children, his neighbors, his co-workers and his friends. He handed the young man the paper and suggested, "Why don't you go ask them?"

Kaufman's program continues and extends this historic Anabaptist practical moral theology. He is convinced that the human is "most fundamentally a practical or active being."[18] Therefore, moral questions—what ought I do?—are prior to questions of truth and meaning. Highly speculative questions about the ontological nature of God, the architecture of the soul, or the spiritual structure of morality are unanswerable. Thus, Kaufman suggests that the proper question relative to God and morality is not focused on what is *true* but on what is *right.*[19] For example, does commitment to a given picture of God and model of morality give order, meaning, salvation, liberation and humaneness to life or does it oppress, destroy and kill the spirit of life? Does it lead to peace and wholeness or does it provoke yet another religious or tribal war? This model of practical rather than speculative moral reasoning would not surprise our Anabaptist forbears. It invites us beyond a static metaphysics of morals to a creative poetics of obligation.[20]

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[16]"Human Creativity, Cosmic Creativity and the Theological Imagination: Reflections on the Work of Gordon Kaufman," *Religious Studies Review* 20 (July 1994), 177.

[17]I first heard this story in a conversation with J. C. Wenger about Mennonite ethics in the fall of 1979 at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Elkhart, Indiana.

[18]Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 100.

[19]Ibid., 107.

[20]I first heard the phrase, "poetics of obligation," when I began my studies in theology and philosophy at Duquesne University, an institution grounded in Continental phenomenology and existentialism. John Caputo in his *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) uses the notion of a poetics of

Conclusion

Other writers in this collection of essays have brought a hermeneutics of suspicion to bear on what they perceive to be blind spots in Kaufman's theological project. This is how it should be in a productive hermeneutics of peoplehood. However, as this essay demonstrates, I chose to engage in this exercise of a hermeneutics of connection for both personal and scholarly reasons. Many years ago I almost completely lost interest in academic theology. Most scribal theology was putting both my soul and my mind to sleep. Then in 1981 I read two new books, David Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination* and Gordon Kaufman's *The Theological Imagination*.[21] Those books, although quite different from one another in tone and method, gave me a passion for the possibilities of imaginative God-talk.

Some Mennonite critics have asked, "Does Kaufman's theology really affirm, protect and preserve the extrahistorical or extracosmic reality of God?" To me this is not the most interesting question of the theological endeavor. A far more interesting question is this: Can God, history and imagination ever be separated? For me no theologian in our tradition answers this question more convincingly than Gordon Kaufman. His theological vision provides hope that our broken, divided world can be otherwise, for in the end, we live only what we imagine.

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obligation to overcome a static, inherited morality. *Poiesis* is intended to imply the inventive, creative and pragmatic nature of moral reasoning in response to relational obligations and responsibilities.

[21]Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

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